EXPERIENCE EXCHANGE

Specifications grading: Redefining success in the classroom

Ann Mary Celestini*[1], Lillian Alberry[2]

[1] Trent Fleming School of Nursing, Trent University, Peterborough, ON, Canada
[2] Trent Teaching Commons, Trent University, Peterborough, ON, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Background: Tiered grading practices that use letter, percentage, and numerical systems to express learner achievement of course outcomes are entrenched in nursing education programs. Despite their prevalence, these approaches present notable issues, including limited actionable feedback, challenges in fostering transferable practice competencies, and inconsistencies among evaluators. These concerns highlight the need for alternative assessment practices by educators that better support student learning and achievement of course outcomes.
Methods: A fourth-year online nursing course was redesigned by the course instructor to employ specifications grading, an objective-driven, mastery-based assessment model. The implementation strategies and subsequent course revisions are documented and investigated following the highlights from the design.
Discussion: The main challenges encountered by the instructor during the implementation phase included adapting new course structures to the existing ones, clarifying learner expectations, and supporting learners in transitioning to a new assessment framework. Revision opportunities helped improve transparency, alignment with learning outcomes, and learner engagement.
Conclusions: Specifications grading demonstrates potential as a viable alternative assessment to traditional systems. Considering the novelty of this approach, recommendations and lessons learned are provided to guide educators considering similar approaches.

Key Words: Alternative assessment, Course redesign and implementation, Online nursing education, Specifications grading

1. INTRODUCTION

In nursing education, assessment practices remain largely anchored in traditional grading systems that rely on percentage scores, letter grades, or numerical rankings to represent student achievement of course and program outcomes. While these approaches are deeply institutionalized across Canadian postsecondary contexts, a growing body of literature highlights persistent concerns related to their pedagogical effectiveness, consistency, and relevance to professional practice.[1–3] Across disciplines, traditional grading has been criticized for emphasizing performance over learning, limiting the utility of feedback, and inadequately capturing the complexity of applied competencies in fields such as nursing.[3,4]

A central concern within a traditional evaluation system is that learners may not be able to incorporate feedback.[3,5] This is particularly evident with one-and-done assessments,[6] such as multiple-choice examinations, which often are not reviewed in class or returned to learners for improvement. Many courses in postsecondary programs rely on letter or numerical grades based on a small number of heavily weighted assignments scheduled at set points throughout the semester. This structure is intended to measure a student's

*Correspondence: Ann Mary Celestini; Email: ziazima3@aol.com; Address: Trent Fleming School of Nursing, Trent University, Peterborough, ON, Canada.

understanding of key learning objectives; however, because grades are typically calculated as an aggregate score, a student can pass individual assignments and the overall course without demonstrating full mastery of every associated learning outcome.

The accuracy and consistency between instructor grading methods are also significant concerns within the current marking system. Despite attempts to grade objectively, educators vary in their interpretations of quality and in their understanding of rubrics and guidelines.[3] This subjectivity raises questions about fairness and comparability, particularly in programs such as nursing, where evaluation outcomes may affect readiness for professional practice. Indeed, emerging evidence suggests that traditional grading systems do not consistently translate to clinical competence, highlighting a misalignment between academic evaluation and practice-based performance expectations.[4]

Beyond issues of validity and reliability, traditional grading systems have also been critiqued for their broader social and psychological impacts. Grading practices can reinforce deficit-based perceptions of learners, contributing to stigma and reduced self-efficacy, particularly among those who consistently receive lower grades.[7] From an equity perspective, these systems may reproduce existing disparities by privileging performance on narrow forms of assessment while failing to account for diverse ways of demonstrating learning. Collectively, these concerns have prompted increasing calls for alternative assessment approaches that prioritize learning, transparency, and competency development over ranking and comparison.[1, 8]

Within this evolving landscape, a range of alternative assessment models has emerged, including ungrading, authentic assessment, competency-based education, and mastery learning approaches. While these models differ in implementation, they share a common emphasis on shifting the focus of assessment from summative evaluation toward formative learning processes and demonstrable competence. Despite numerous limitations, traditionally tiered grading methods continue to dominate assessment practices in academic settings.[1, 3, 8] Few feasible assessment options exist for nursing faculty who want to modify their teaching practices and integrate an alternative method of learner assessment into their courses.[2] Thus, there is a critical need for educators to find a better approach to grading in higher education.

Specifications grading is one assessment method that can help address some of these inconsistencies in practice for educators. This approach aligns well with a competency-based curriculum often used in nursing.[9, 10] Therefore, the purpose of this discussion is to share anecdotal experiences with the design and implementation of a fourth-year online nursing course using an adapted version of specifications grading to link it to the existing traditional assessment system. Challenges encountered during the design and implementation phases are highlighted, followed by a reflection on the benefits, lessons learned, limitations, and recommendations for educators.

Specifications grading can be understood as an applied convergence of several complementary theoretical frameworks. First, it is grounded in the principles of mastery learning, which posit that all learners can achieve high levels of understanding when provided with clear objectives, appropriate support, and sufficient opportunities for revision.[11] Second, it aligns closely with competency-based education that prioritizes the demonstration of proficiency in defined skills and outcomes, which is an essential requirement in nursing education and practice.[9] Third, specifications grading incorporates key elements of self-determination theory by supporting learner autonomy (through choice of tasks or pathways), competence (through clear success criteria), and relatedness (through iterative feedback and instructor support).[12, 13] Together, these frameworks position specifications grading as both a pedagogical and motivational approach to assessment.

Empirical research on specifications grading in higher education has demonstrated a range of benefits. Across disciplines, studies report increased student engagement, improved submission quality, reduced grading ambiguity, and enhanced alignment between assessments and learning objectives.[14–16] Students have also been found to experience reduced anxiety and greater perceived control over their learning, particularly when revision opportunities are embedded within the assessment structure.[17] However, the literature also identifies notable challenges, including student resistance to unfamiliar grading systems, difficulties interpreting progress toward final grades, and logistical constraints related to implementation at scale.[15, 18, 19]

Despite this growing body of research, several important gaps remain. Much of the existing literature on specifications grading is situated within STEM disciplines, with comparatively limited exploration in nursing education contexts. Further, there is a lack of detailed, practice-oriented accounts of how specifications grading can be adapted to align with institutional requirements that mandate traditional grading outputs (e.g., percentage-based final grades). Limited attention has also been paid to the practical constraints of implementation, including the limitations of Learning Management Systems (LMS), workload considerations, and the need to balance flexibility with clarity in course design. These gaps are particularly salient in nursing education, where assessment

practices must balance academic rigour, professional competency requirements, and the realities of students' clinical workloads.

In response to these gaps, the design, implementation, and evaluation of an adapted specifications grading model within a traditional grading framework is presented in this paper. Workplace Health, Safety, and Wellbeing of the Nurse is an elective fourth-year course that is offered fully online over a 12-week semester to a maximum of 35 learners. In May 2024, the redevelopment of six existing course modules using specifications grading principles began, with support from an e-learning design specialist from the institution's Teaching Commons. The project took approximately eight to nine months to develop and set up. Before outlining the specifics of this project, it is important to clarify several key terms that will be referenced throughout. The challenges encountered, revisions implemented, lessons learned and limitations are examined to provide practical insights for educators seeking to adopt alternative assessment approaches in similar contexts.

2. Key terms and theoretical foundations

2.1 Traditional grading

Traditional grading practices require the instructor to assign points to individual assessments and total them into a percentage or letter grade for the learner by the end of the course.[6, 17] For this discussion, traditional grading refers to percentage grades based on a few key assignments in the course.

2.2 Alternative assessment

Alternative assessment includes a variety of evaluation approaches that extend beyond traditional exams and tests and can be used by educators to measure students' knowledge, skills, and application more accurately.[20] The main premise of alternative forms of assessment is to move away from grade-focused evaluation and increase focus on the process and learning.[21] Specifications grading is one such method.

2.3 Specifications grading

Specifications grading is a mastery-oriented assessment method that involves developing specifications, or specs, for each assignment or activity, as identified in this course.[17] Four key elements are common to this alternative grading method. A list of specifications that describe qualities and characteristics of a successful submission is created. The work is then graded holistically by the instructor using a rubric with specifications to assess whether the learner meets or exceeds all the requirements for each activity, and full credit is earned.[6, 17] If the submitted activity does not meet all the specifications, no credit or partial credit is awarded. Grades may be allocated based on the completion of assignment bundles. In this course example, designers did not use bundles, and an adapted version of weighted activities was used in the design. Tokens, another element of specifications grading, were also not used in this project to minimize confusion for learners and keep the formatting changes as simple as possible. Specifications grading is based on various theoretical principles, including mastery learning,[11] competency-based approaches,[22] and self-determination theory.[12]

2.4 Mastery learning

Specifications grading adopts the principles of mastery learning.[11] Mastery learning emphasizes that students should be given clear learning objectives, explicit criteria for success, and multiple opportunities to revise their work until mastery is achieved. Specifications grading was adopted using this structure, with detailed specifications that served as met-or-not met criteria to guide students in demonstrating mastery.[17] In this course, revisions were also permitted for the most complex activity, since it was worth the most points. In addition to mastery learning, specifications grading aligns with competency-based education.

2.5 Competency-based education

Competency-based education focuses on the learner's demonstration of proficiency in defined skills and outcomes.[22] This type of learning is essential to nursing practice and student education.[9] In this redesign, transparency of expectations and assessment methods was established by providing clear specifications that linked to the objectives. Similar to competency-based education, specifications grading has frequently been linked to self-determination theory.

2.6 Self-determination theory

Specifications grading and self-determination theory converge around core principles of motivation, autonomy, competence, and relatedness in learning. Self-determination theory identifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as the three basic psychological needs driving intrinsic motivation and well-being.[23, 24] Assessment practices, like specifications grading, that provide meaningful choices, ownership over learning processes, and clear rationales for tasks tend to support autonomy and promote more self-determined engagement. Relatedness is associated with feedback, instructor rapport, and collaborative learning contexts. Specifications grading, when paired with timely, constructive feedback, can strengthen relatedness by creating a supportive feedback loop and a sense of belonging within the learning community.

Feedback processes and supportive teacher-student relationships contribute to perceived relatedness.[24,25] Relatedness has been described as significantly enhancing student motivation and persistence.[13]

Taken together, specifications grading operationalizes an assessment model that shifts the focus from ranking performance to supporting learning. By integrating mastery-oriented revision processes, competency-based outcome alignment, and motivational supports grounded in self-determination theory, this approach addresses many of the limitations identified in traditional grading systems while remaining adaptable to institutional constraints.

3. Benefits and challenges with specifications grading

Specifications grading in postsecondary education has been shown to offer numerous benefits for both learners and instructors. For students, advantages include fostering intrinsic motivation and mastery learning,[14] encouraging active engagement in online learning activities,[26,27] reducing anxiety and stress often linked to a lack of control over grades,[17] and providing opportunities to complete low-stakes assignments through revision options. This approach also aligns learning goals with measurable outcomes, helping learners understand expectations and take responsibility for achievement,[28] while contributing to improved academic success in online settings.[14–16] Instructors benefit from improved submission quality, reduced grading time, and stronger alignment of assessments with course objectives.[17]

Despite the many benefits of specifications grading, challenges also exist. For learners, difficulties often stem from unfamiliarity with the grading system and the lack of partial credit opportunities.[17] Students may also struggle to interpret specifications grading instructions and language.[29] For instructors, specifications grading requires substantial upfront design effort to articulate specifications, create rubrics, and criteria. Additionally, during implementation, instructors must monitor student progress, provide timely feedback, and manage periodic reassessments as needed. This can result in substantial workload implications for instructors, particularly in large classes or online environments.[29,30] Considering these benefits and challenges of specifications grading, the project process details emerged.

4. Project description

In 2024, a fourth-year online nursing course was redesigned from a traditionally weighted grading system with three major assignments into a specifications grading format. The existing 12-week online course was restructured into six modules, each spanning two weeks. This redesign was the result of an eight-month collaboration between the course instructor and experts in the Teaching Commons.

Traditionally graded assignments aligned with course outcomes were modified into Key and Other Activities. Each activity was assigned a predetermined number of points based on its cognitive complexity and the time required to complete it. Within each module, both Key Activities (italicized in Table 1) and Other Activities were linked to the learning objectives. Each activity contributed a set number of points toward the final course grade, with a maximum of 100 points for the semester. For example, modules one and six were allotted a maximum of 10 points each, while modules two through five were allotted 20 points each, totalling 100 points for the semester.

Learners were provided the flexibility to select activities within each module, up to the preset maximum number of points. Any combination of Key and Other Activities could be chosen and completed by students to earn their final course grade.

4.1 Key activities

Key Activities were designed using previous course assignments that were already aligned with course outcomes. These activities were allotted more points due to their greater cognitive complexity and longer time commitment. For example, as the central assignment in the course, the two-part Project Proposal (Parts A and B) carries the highest point value because it requires learners to apply course concepts and demonstrate higher-order thinking skills. To encourage learners to complete this key activity, it was assigned 20 points toward the module total. Weighting activities in this way was intended to encourage learners to engage with more challenging tasks, thereby supporting achievement of the learning outcomes. Key Activity points accounted for 75% of the total course grade, aligning with maintaining at least a B-level standard that is consistent with recommendations for specifications grading.[17]

For both parts of the Project Proposal, learners could request up to a one-week extension beyond the original due date without penalty. This flexibility was intentionally built into the design to prevent unnecessary late penalties and eliminate the need for a token system, thereby reducing complexity and monitoring demands for both learners and faculty.[6] Flexible assessment practices also support improved self-regulation, self-efficacy, academic engagement, and overall performance.[31] To supplement these Key Activities, the existing readings, resources, and questions recommended for learners in the original course design formed the basis for the Other Activities.

Table 1. Module and activity points system (100 points/semester)

Module	Activity	Points
Module One (up to 10 points maximum)	*Getting to Know You Forum*	*(2 points/module)*
	Educational Module	*(2 points/module)*
	Read and Reflect	(1 point each to 5 points/module)
	Explore and Explain	(1 point each to 5 points/module)
	Search and Share	(1 point each to 5 points/module)
	Activity, Quiz, or Question(s)	(1 point each/module)
Module Two (up to 20 points maximum)	*Project Building Session One*	*(3 x 5 points each to 15 points/module)*
	Read and Reflect	(1 point each to 5 points/module)
	Explore and Explain	(1 point each to 5 points/module)
	Search and Share	(1 point each to 5 points/module)
	Activity, Quiz, or Question(s)	(1 point each/module)
Module Three (up to 20 points maximum)	*Project Building Session Two*	*(3 x 5 points each up to 15 points/module)*
	Read and Reflect	(1 point each to 5 points/module)
	Explore and Explain	(1 point each to 5 points/module)
	Search and Share	(1 point each to 5 points/module)
	Activity, Quiz, or Question(s)	(1 point each/module)
Module Four (up to 20 points maximum)	*Project Proposal*	*(20 points/module)*
	Read and Reflect	(1 point each to 5 points/module)
	Explore and Explain	(1 point each to 5 points/module)
	Search and Share	(1 point each to 5 points/module)
	Activity, Quiz, or Question(s)	(1 point each/module)
Module Five (up to 20 points maximum)	*Peer Project Feedback*	*(3 x 5 points each up to 15 points/module)*
	Read and Reflect	(1 point each to 5 points/module)
	Explore and Explain	(1 point each to 5 points/module)
	Search and Share	(1 point each to 5 points/module)
	Activity, Quiz, or Question(s)	(1 point each/module)
Module Six (up to 10 points maximum)	*Final Thoughts Forum*	*(2 points/module)*
	Educational Module	*(2 points/module)*
	Read and Reflect	(1 point each to 5 points/module)
	Explore and Explain	(1 point each to 5 points/module)
	Search and Share	(1 point each, up 5 points/module)
	Activity, Quiz, or Question(s)	(1 point each/module)

4.2 Other activities

Other Activities were developed to complement the Key Activities and provide learners with additional opportunities to meet module objectives. These options for learners to earn points towards their final grade included activities such as read and reflect, explore and explain, search and share, and quiz or question choices. These Activities were less cognitively complex, required less time to complete, and therefore were allotted one point each. In this new course format, learners could select and complete both Key and Other Activities, up to the maximum number of points set for each module within the identified timelines. One example combination of the Key and Other Activities required to obtain an 80% in the course is included for context (see Table 2).

Following the development of the module's activities and point systems, the specifications for each activity and the grading methods were identified. Once this was established, the details of the grading process were specified.

4.3 Specifications and module format

After establishing the activity and module point structure, detailed specifications were created for each activity. Existing assignment guidelines were used, and the previous three-level rubric was consolidated into a single-level criterion rubric, which designates each specification as either met or not met (see Table 3).

The course consists of six online modules, each divided into two weekly segments within the institution's LMS to facilitate navigation. Consistent formatting is especially important in online environments to ensure accessibility for all learners.[26,31] Each module begins with an instructor-recorded overview video and a list of learning objectives, followed by

content highlights and curated links to articles and videos providing multiple formats for content items. This approach aligns with the pedagogical goal of inclusivity, allowing all students to benefit from online education regardless of their individual circumstances.[32] Modules conclude with a summary to reinforce key concepts before transitioning to the next section. Activity instructions and assignment drop boxes appear immediately after the module content to maintain consistent organization and eliminate the need for learners to search elsewhere in the LMS. Providing clearly structured, logically organized content is considered essential in online course design.[26,31] A separate specifications-grading section was added to the course site, including audio directions from the instructor and examples of activity combinations needed to earn various final grades. Exemplars of acceptable work from previous learners were also posted to clarify expectations for more complex assignments, providing an assessment framework to enhance transparency and student understanding.[17,31]

Table 2. Learner example (80% final grade-key and other activities)

Module and Points	Met specifications for completion of activities
Module One (8/10 points earned)	Getting to Know You Forum (2 points) Education Module (2 points) Read and Reflect (2 completed x 1 point each = 2 points) Search and Share (2 completed x 1 point each = 2 points)
Module Two (16/20 points earned)	Project Building Session One (3 completed x 5 points each = 15 points) Read and Reflect (1 completed x 1 point each = 1 point)
Module Three (15/20 points earned)	Project Building Session Two (3 completed x 5 points each = 15 points)
Module Four (20/20 points earned)	Project Proposal (20 points)
Module Five (15/20 points earned)	Peer Project Feedback (2 peer projects reviews completed x 5 points each = 10 points) Read and Reflect (1 completed x 1 point each = 1 point) Explore and Explain (3 completed x 1 point each = 3 points) Activity, Quiz, or Question(s) (1 completed x 1 point = 1 point)
Module Six Points (6/10 points earned)	Final Thoughts Forum (2 points) Educational Module (2 points) Explore and Explain (2 completed x 1 point each = 2 points)
Total 80/100 points	

Table 3. Read and reflect activity specifications

Specifications	MET	NOT MET
Highlights key points in the document and links to related course concepts		
Main points presented supported with evidence as needed.		
Reflection has a clear message and narration but may contain overuse of simple sentences and occasional grammatical and spelling mistakes. APA was used correctly for most of the response.		

5. COURSE IMPLEMENTATION

Concerns about enrollment, ease of navigation, use of an unfamiliar grading system, and learner workload arose during the implementation of this new course assessment format. The instructor was surprised to note that this offering had an unexpectedly low enrollment of 21 students, compared to the typical 35. It is not clear whether the course's format affected enrollment.

Navigating the course site was relatively straightforward following the sequential module completion model used. Learners submitted activities in their originating modules. Revisions are useful for learner success.[33] However, resubmission became an issue, as these needed to be linked in the same drop box to be integrated into the gradebook. Thus, learners who wanted to resubmit had to do so in the appropriate forum. Because of the LMS gradebook system at this organization, learners had to resubmit to the same forum, which may not have been appreciated by some learners. While the feedback itself was not visible, learners could see which students had to resubmit activities and thus knew who did not meet the activity specifications.

Stress related to the unfamiliar grading system was expressed by a few learners and experienced by the instructor. Informally, a few learners reached out via email expressing concerns about maintaining grade averages for further advanced education and studies. Assignment weighting and general grading were initially identified as stressful by a few students. Most significantly, learner misconceptions related to their current grade standing or percentage in the course created concern. For example, the difference between an individual's assignment grade and the actual weighted percentage at that point in the course seemed difficult for students to grasp. This makes sense considering the traditional assessment methods in place and their focus on a few high-stakes assignments. To exacerbate the issue, it seemed consistently difficult for learners to understand the all-or-nothing grading concept for each activity. The idea of partial marks seemed to be anticipated despite clear indications and guidance to the contrary. This may have occurred as learners were too busy with their program workload to reach out for support. Comparable findings have been reported in previous studies.[16,18,19,33]

In nursing education, it was crucial to consider students' workload, as most were concurrently completing clinical consolidation in their fourth year, which is comparable to full-time hours. Stress about not overloading learners with coursework was a constant pressure throughout the semester, requiring intense monitoring. Every student resubmitted at least one activity during the semester, but most did so in the first module. The majority of learners had to resubmit the most complex course activity because many were missing one or more specifications. One learner had been submitting activity responses at an advanced level until the main activity was completed late in the semester and had to be resubmitted three times for full points. Resubmission raised concerns for a few learners, as the extra time needed to be accounted for in their schoolwork.

The instructor stressed that maintaining unwritten administrative rules about learner averages was a consistent concern. The rigour of the grades and their comparability to other courses in the program caused significant distress. Additionally, as the semester progressed, issues with the compatibility of this new grading approach with the LMS capabilities surfaced. One significant issue was the university system's capabilities, which made it difficult to determine grades. The LMS grade book displayed the denominator of a learner's mark as the total possible activities for each module, rather than the total maximum points, which panicked many, as the grade was displayed in red rather than green, as it typically displays for a passing mark. A couple of learners reached out to ask for support and to express their shock at seeing this in their grade book, particularly in their fourth year of study and given their familiarity with the system. Existing studies corroborate these observations.[18] In future offerings, using a separate spreadsheet to calculate points totals would be recommended. Considering these issues, course revisions were necessary throughout the semester.

5.1 Course revisions

Activity submission timelines, weighting, and resubmission opportunities were three areas in the course requiring revisions. Initially, during the design phase, there was no flexibility regarding resubmissions for any assignments except the project proposal, given both the instructor and student workloads. Flexibility has been positively noted in similar research.[16] Thus, only the most complex and heavily weighted assignment worth 20 points in module four was initially offered as an option. However, after the first two modules, it became clear that some learners were struggling to meet the activity submission deadlines; thus, the deadlines were extended. Everything was due at the end of each module to make it more straightforward for learners to navigate. Retrospectively, trying to integrate this additional level of flexibility was an overambitious idea that only made the process more confusing than it needed to be. Keeping the changes transparent and straightforward was crucial to success.[34]

Additionally, the option to submit more group responses, weighted more heavily, was extended in two modules (discussion forums). This was in response to the low submission of Other Activities noted by the instructor in the initial modules of the course. Considering the activities were directly based on existing assignments, previous offering examples of acceptable work were posted. Despite this, all but a handful of students completed the most complex activity correctly the first time.

If available, examples would have been beneficial to post for all the Activities and would likely have minimized initial struggles in module one to earn full points. Following consent, learner examples were posted throughout the semester. Considering this and the size of this course enrolment, resubmissions for all assignments were offered to everyone without penalties. These may seem like significant stressors, but three key benefits were noted that are essential to learning.

5.2 Benefits encountered

Grading time, submission quality, and success in meeting course objectives were three significant benefits noted during the implementation of this course. Grading activities took significantly less time because there was no need to determine a percentage or rate the student's performance

relative to others in the class; only check off met or not met categories. Thus, the turnaround time on assignments or activities was quick, giving learners who had to resubmit work additional time. The literature supports similar benefits as grading becomes less ambiguous and more efficient.[16,33]

These findings align with a growing body of literature suggesting that specifications grading shifts the focus of assessment from performance evaluation to learning processes. Consistent with previous studies,[16,33] the reduction in grading time observed in this course can be attributed to the elimination of subjective point allocation and the use of clearly defined criteria. More importantly, this efficiency did not come at the expense of learning; rather, it appears to have enhanced instructional capacity to provide timely, targeted feedback.

The observed improvement in submission quality supports previous findings that specifications grading promotes improved performance outcomes.[10] Unlike traditional grading systems, where students may strategically aim for partial credit, the all-or-nothing structure required learners to address all aspects of the specifications. This aligns with mastery learning principles, where iterative refinement is central to achieving competence.[14] The requirement to meet all criteria appears to have encouraged greater attention to detail and stronger integration of course concepts, consistent with findings in other disciplines.[14,34]

Additionally, the opportunity for revision played a critical role in supporting learning. The fact that all learners resubmitted at least once suggests that the model successfully normalized revision as part of the learning process rather than as a remedial activity. This reflects broader literature indicating that opportunities for reassessment are associated with improved academic outcomes and increased learner confidence.[16]

The time required of instructors for grading has been described as varying in the literature.[32] In this case, the use of specifications grading significantly reduced grading time and stress associated with assigning grades. Associated research indicated no change in the amount of grading time required.[16] The learner can select any grade and work towards meeting it. Throughout the design and implementation of this alternative course assessment method, a few key lessons were identified for the future. Meetings with students were primarily focused on content missed rather than on disputing grades, which is consistent with the research.[32]

Additional details were added only to that specification requiring attention. When it came to grades, there were no complaints or issues with grade grubbing (students attempting to negotiate grades for reasons other than academic merit), either via email or in online meetings, as support was offered to each learner to meet their academic course goal or target grade. McKnelly et al.,[16] describe similar results. The use of specifications-based grading significantly helped minimize grading time and stress associated with assigning grades.[19] The learner had the opportunity to select any grade and work towards meeting it. The instructor's role becomes more facilitative, which should be at the root of all education.

Another extremely evident benefit was the significant improvement in the overall quality of student submissions and resubmissions. Attention to addressing each activity specification was evident, with increasingly improved resubmitted assignments and a clear link to course concepts. Response quality increased as learners addressed issues in meeting the specifications through formative feedback. The specifications grading approach ensured that each student met both assignment and larger course objectives by meeting the specifications for each activity or assignment. The focus of learning was on understanding missing content rather than the grade. A systematic review conducted by Horwitz et al.[19] suggests similar findings.

Learner course success was also noted as the primary factor. The course average was comparable to previous offerings, and no one reached out to request grade adjustments due to not meeting their course goals. The majority of students earned their target grade for the semester. However, one learner dropped the course before the drop date, another registered late, and one failed, which is atypical in this course. This trend was also evident across the literature.[19]

Given that the specifications were based on the assignment and course objectives, it was apparent that learners had met all objectives, consistent with other research findings.[14] Unfortunately, one learner dropped the course before the drop date, another registered late, and one failed, which is atypical in this course.

5.3 Lessons learned

Several important lessons were gained through the development and implementation of this specifications-based assessment method. System capacities, context, and insufficient time for revision as part of the existing program workload are among the areas to consider. The capacities of the system and staff (instructor, teaching support, and information technology support) should be considered when designing the course. Despite some thoughtful and grandiose ideas for organizing the course content, significant issues related to the LMS's compatibility and limitations were noted as

causing stress among learners and the instructor throughout the semester.

The challenges encountered in this implementation also align with those identified in existing research, particularly regarding students' adaptation to unfamiliar grading systems. Consistent with prior studies,[18, 19] learners initially struggled to interpret their progress and understand the implications of a binary grading structure. This highlights a critical tension in specifications grading: while the model enhances transparency in expectations, it may simultaneously disrupt deeply ingrained assumptions about how grades function.

From a theoretical perspective, this tension can be understood through the lens of self-determination theory. While the model was designed to support autonomy and competence, initial confusion and uncertainty may have temporarily undermined students' sense of control. This suggests that successful implementation requires not only clear structural design but also intentional scaffolding to support learners' transition into a new assessment paradigm.

Practical constraints, particularly those related to the LMS, further illustrate a significant gap between theoretical models of assessment and institutional realities. The misalignment between the specifications grading structure and the LMS gradebook created confusion and anxiety among learners, reinforcing findings that technological infrastructure can significantly shape assessment experiences.[18] This underscores the importance of considering system compatibility as a central component of course design, rather than as a secondary logistical concern.

It is also important to consider the course context in the lives of busy students. In the fourth year of the nursing program, the clinical and course workload is heavy for students. Full-time clinical hours and two online courses are typical for these students. Thus, purposeful changes should be made with these potential barriers in mind.

Throughout the implementation of this redesigned course, key issues with traditional grading practices emerged. A lack of actionable feedback opportunities and sufficient time to revise work or demonstrate learning from an error or similar, emerged as being critical obstacles to learning. Most alarmingly, the realization that many learners are likely passing courses with partial marks and potentially not meeting all the outcomes is sobering.[28] Learners are passing courses but may not necessarily be meeting course objectives.

5.4 Limitations

Based on the lessons learned and limitations identified, several essential recommendations can be made. Considering the course implementation, a few limitations were noted. Input was derived from practice-based sources, including instructor observations, informal student questions, and course-level outcomes, rather than from systematically collected empirical measures, introducing potential bias. The instructor's multiple roles as designer, implementer, and evaluator of the grading approach may have influenced the interpretation of perceived project outcomes. Additionally, the implementation was shaped by institutional constraints, particularly limitations within the LMS, which may not be present in other contexts. Future research is needed to further evaluate the effectiveness and scalability of specifications grading in nursing education.

5.5 Recommendations

As a result of this project redesign and implementation, the importance of specifying clear guidelines, differences in grading systems, examples of acceptable work, and concise assessment specifications is crucial. Establishing clear guidelines for learners about new system changes, expectations, and assignment specifications, with several examples of acceptable work at different levels, was also found to be beneficial. While supplemental examples were provided once the course was underway, it would have been more helpful to students from the beginning.

Providing additional information about the primary differences between traditional and specifications grading methods, such as examples of a range of acceptable work, may have helped to minimize the issue. Students benefited from concrete examples of how specifications grading is linked to final grades. For instance, a table demonstrating a 70% final grade submission, including examples of acceptable work and detailed instructions in multiple formats were posted. This is supported by previous research demonstrating that providing examples supports clinical reasoning and knowledge when used to guide attention and problem-solving.[33]

Anticipating challenges during the initial implementation of a new grading approach is essential, as both learners and educators experience adjustment-related stress. Proactive planning allows educators to identify potential issues, particularly those related to LMS compatibility, and address them before they impact the course or learners. Recognizing that not all elements will function as intended reinforces the importance of flexibility. Formal course review processes with other faculty and staff further strengthen this approach by providing implementation fidelity.[35]

Implementing specifications grading within a smaller class or a non-mandatory course can provide a lower-risk environment for initial adoption, allowing educators to monitor outcomes and make iterative adjustments. Offering the course

as an elective enables students to self-select into the experience, which may increase openness to alternative grading approaches and provide more meaningful feedback on its effectiveness.

Reviewing and revising the weighting of course activities with flexibility and explicit consideration of the broader context of students' lives and educational demands can enhance both feasibility and learner success. Although initial efforts were made to address weighting during the course redesign, more deliberate attention to contextual factors led to improved alignment between course expectations and students' capacity to engage meaningfully with the work.

Providing regular reminders and maintaining frequent communication through announcements is particularly beneficial in online learning environments,[36] as it supports clarity, reinforces expectations, and helps sustain student engagement. Consistent communication ensures that learners remain informed about course requirements and deadlines, reducing confusion and promoting timely participation. Effective ongoing communication can support timely intervention and improve learner engagement and satisfaction.[37] Emphasizing time management is particularly important for learners intending to revise and resubmit assignments, as this process requires sustained engagement throughout the course.

Offering consistent reassurance that educators are committed to helping students achieve course objectives can reduce anxiety and resistance, particularly in online environments where changes to grading practices may feel unfamiliar. Instructor reassurance has further been found to support learner well-being during uncertainty and stress.[38] Establishing trust through instructor presence, transparency, consistency, and flexibility is critical to fostering a supportive learning environment and facilitating student adaptation to new assessment models.

Taken together, the experiences from this implementation suggest that specifications grading holds significant promise as an alternative assessment approach in nursing education, particularly in enhancing alignment among learning outcomes, assessment practices, and student engagement. However, its effectiveness is contingent on careful attention to contextual factors, including institutional policies, technological infrastructure, and learner readiness. While the model addresses many limitations of traditional grading, such as a lack of actionable feedback, inconsistent evaluation, and limited opportunities for mastery, it also introduces new challenges related to clarity, workload management, and system integration.

This research project contributes to a growing but still limited body of literature examining specifications grading in applied, practice-based disciplines. By documenting both the benefits and constraints of implementation within a nursing context, it extends existing research beyond theoretical advocacy to practical application. These findings highlight the need for continued exploration of hybrid models that retain the pedagogical strengths of specifications grading while accommodating institutional requirements for traditional grading outputs.

6. Conclusions

Assessment in postsecondary nursing education has traditionally been based on practices that prioritize aggregated, easily ranked scores over demonstrating competence. Educators can redesign a traditional assessment format using an adapted form of specifications grading to capture student progress in class. Existing assignments, rubrics, and readings, linked to course objectives, can be modified into activities worth points depending on the complexity and time required to complete each.

During course implementation, the instructor encountered obstacles related to low course enrolment, difficulty navigating the course content, and learners' unfamiliarity with the grading system. Most prominently, consideration of students' workload was essential throughout the entire semester. Through informal feedback from learners and close monitoring of students on the LMS, course revisions, such as flexibility in timelines, activity weighting, and the use of more detailed guidelines with examples, were incorporated into the semester. The benefits noted included achieving the desired grade goal, using actionable feedback, reducing grading time, improving submission quality, and meeting course objectives exceeded instructor expectations for this initial change in practice.

The outcomes of this course implementation process reinforce concerns identified in the literature, particularly regarding the limited capacity of traditional grading to support meaningful learning, provide actionable feedback, and ensure alignment with course objectives. At the same time, the implementation of a specifications grading model demonstrates that alternative approaches can address many of these limitations by emphasizing flexibility, transparency, learner support and engagement.

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Authors contributions

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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