Grades and Scales

Grades are a necessary evil in modern education. They take a complex task—learning a new subject—and reduce it to a single measure. Grades can function as both carrot and stick for motivating students, and they are the primary measure of success in a course. Tracking and calculating grades are serious and tedious tasks. Fortunately, Moodle has a great tool to help.

The Moodle grades area is a sophisticated tool for tracking student scores in your course. You can use it for scored activities both in the classroom and in Moodle. Moodle 1.8 introduces a number of useful improvements, including options to assign extra credit, grade on a curve, and exclude a particular score from a student's total grade.

With the new improvements, you should consider using the Moodle gradebook as your primary tool for recording scores and calculating grades. Students will appreciate being able to check their grades at any time and to compare themselves to the class average.

Grades aren't the only way to give feedback to students. With Moodle's scales, you can create lists of nonnumeric feedback options for assessing student work. Moodle comes with one scale by default, "Separate and Connected ways of knowing," which we'll discuss later in this chapter. You can easily create your own additional scales for feedback options that are meaningful to you and your students.

Using Grades

This section covers the following MTC skills: 7.4 Grades

You can access the grades area by clicking the Grades link in the Administration block on your course page.

The View Grades page, as shown in Figure 13-1, contains a table listing students in the course together with their grades for each activity.

You can sort the table by student last name or first name by clicking the respective links under the student column on either the left or right side. Initially, it's sorted by last name.

Figure 13-1. Viewing grades

To display the grades for one particular student only, click on his name. This is useful when you are looking at grades together with a student and you need to protect the privacy of other students.

On the right is the Total column. There are two arrows for sorting student totals in descending or ascending order. There is also a Stats link, which displays statistics for the class in a pop-up window.

Each graded activity name links to the grades for that particular activity.

Buttons above the grades table enable you to download course grades in a choice of three formats: Open Document Spreadsheet, Excel, or text. Also at the top of the page is the Set Preferences tab.

Set Preferences

The Set Preferences page contains the following settings:

Reprint Headers
This preference sets the frequency with which Moodle will display a row with the column labels rather than scores. With a large class, this feature can make it easier to view a large number of graded activities without losing track of individual grades.

Show Hidden Items
You can choose whether to show or hide hidden graded activities on the View Grades page.

Advanced Features

Clicking the "Use Advanced Features" button on the Set Preferences page reveals further settings, as shown in Figure 13-2. Tabs for setting categories, weights, grade letters, and grade exceptions appear at the top of the page. The advanced features enables you to manipulate the raw grade scores however you see fit.
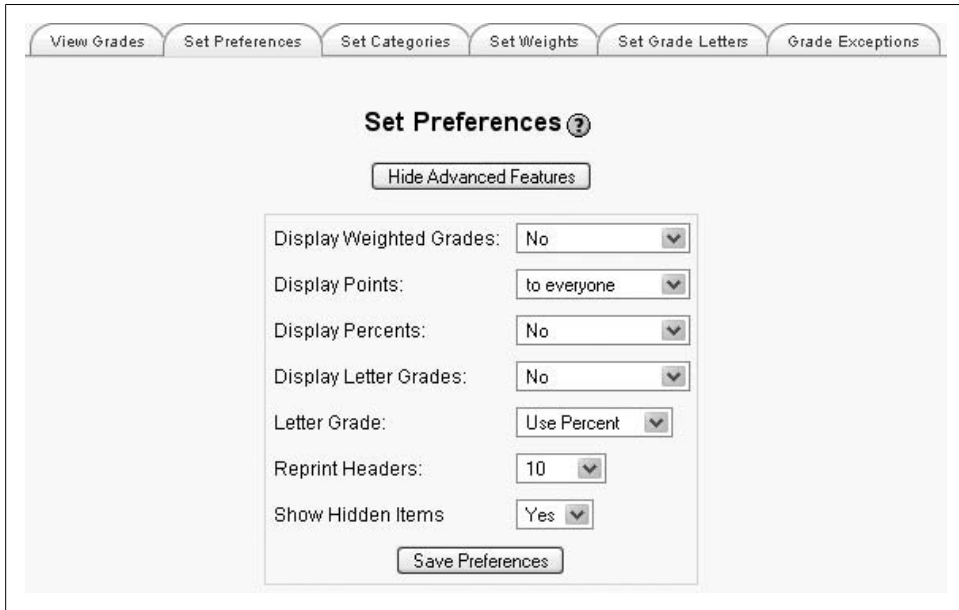
Figure 13-2. Setting preferences with advanced features

Display Weighted Grades
> This determines whether or not the weighted percent will be displayed for you and/or students.

Display Points
> This determines whether points are displayed for you and/or students.

Display Percents
> This determines whether percentages are displayed for you and/or students.

Display Letter Grades
> This determines whether a letter grade is displayed for the course total.

Letter Grade
> This determines whether the letter grade is calculated using a raw or weighted percent.

Set Categories

Categories are the key to using most of the advanced features. Categories are simply collections of graded activities that you can manipulate together. The Extra Credit, Curving, and Weighting features all use Categories to identify which grades to use.

Category
> If you have a lot of graded activities in your course, then arranging them into categories will make grade viewing easier, since the View Grades page can be set to

Figure 13-3. Setting weights

display grades for one particular category rather than for all activities. In addition, you will be able to set weights for the categories.

To add a new category:

1. On the Set Categories page, type a category name into the "Add category" box.

2. Click the "Add category" button.

You will then be able to categorize activities using the new category by selecting it from the Category drop-down menu next to the activity name.

Curve To

Curving sets a new maximum point total for the category. For example, if the maximum grade for an assignment is 30 and the curve to is set to 25, then students' grades and percentages will be calculated against a possible 25 points rather than 30.

Extra Credit

This checkbox is for giving particular activities extra credit. If an activity is marked as extra credit, the points earned by a student will be added to the point total for the category but won't increase the total possible points.

When you are done, click the "Save changes" button.

Set Weights

Once you have set up some categories, you can weight them appropriately on the Set Weights page, as shown in Figure 13-3. The options are:

Weight

This allows you to weight grades by category. The weight is the percent that a category will contribute to a grade's total. The individual weights must add up to 100.

Drop X Lowest
> This allows you to choose to omit grades for activities in which a student has performed badly. However, if you use this feature, the point totals for all activities in the category must be the same.

Bonus Points
> This is used to give extra points that do not change the point total for a category. For example, it can be used to adjust for unfair questions. Bonus points will be applied equally to all students.

Hidden
> If this box is checked it will remove a category from display and grade calculation.

> The hidden category option provides a way of only adding items to the gradebook after they have been graded. Since graded items that have not been categorized will automatically be assigned to "Uncategorized," you can set the Uncategorized category to hidden and then, as you grade items, move them to an appropriate category.

When you are done, click the "Save changes" button.

Set Grade Letters

Here you can set an appropriate grade letter scale for the course total. You may choose letters (e.g., A, B, C, D, E) or words (e.g., Below Pass, Pass, Merit, Distinction).

To set your grade letter scale:

1. Edit the grade letters and/or low and high figures, or leave the default scale as it is. The figures must be written to two decimal places.
2. Click the "Save changes" button.

Grade Exceptions

Here you can exclude students from having particular activities graded. This is useful, for example, in cases of extended illness.

To exclude a student from having an activity graded:

1. Click on the name of the activity(s) in the middle column. Holding down the Ctrl key will allow you to select multiple items.
2. Click on the student's name in the left column.
3. Click on the "Exclude from Grading" button. The student's name will be moved from the left column to the right.

The figures in brackets after the activity names in the middle column denote the number of students excluded from having the activity graded.

Topic 1 Grades ⊘

Topic 1 quiz	Topic 1 assignment	Topic 1 forum	Total	Stats
10	100	100	210	
8	95	-	103	

Figure 13-4. Viewing grades as a student

To include a previously excluded student:

1. Click on the name of the activity in the middle column.
2. Click on the student's name in the right column.
3. Click on the "Include in Grading" button. The student's name will be moved from the right column back to the left.

Student Grade View

Students can check their grades by clicking the Grades link in their Administration block. They can see only their own grades, not the other students', as shown in Figure 13-4.

As for the teacher view, on the right is a total column and a stats link, which displays statistics for the class in a pop-up window.

Creating Scales

This section covers the following MTC skills: 7.3 Scales

Scales are a nonnumeric way of evaluating students' performance. Instead of giving an assignment a number from 1 to 100 as a grade, you can give the student a word or a small phrase as standard feedback.

Moodle's default scale "Separate and Connected ways of knowing" gives you three options: Mostly Separate Knowing, Separate and Connected, and Mostly Connected Knowing. These phrases relate to a theory about how people approach the world. Separate knowers try to remain objective and avoid personalizing knowledge. They like to debate and critique new ideas. Connected knowers learn in a socially connected, empathetic way. They try to find consensus instead of confrontation.

This scale comes with Moodle as a default. Some people use it, but many people create their own. You can create a scale using any rating system you choose.

To create a new scale:

1. Click the Scales link in the Administration block.
2. On the Scales page, shown in Figure 13-5, click the "Add a new scale" button.

Figure 13-5. Viewing scales

Figure 13-6. Adding a new scale

3. On the next page, shown in Figure 13-6, give your scale a name that will identify it clearly. This will appear in scale-selection lists.

4. In the Scale box, create your scale, ranging from negative to positive, separated by commas.

5. Write a meaningful description for your scale. Your students will have access to the description, and you can use this to give them additional feedback. The more details you put in the description, the more students will understand what each scale item means.

6. Click the "Save changes" button.

Once you've created your scale, you can use it in any activity where you would give a grade, except quizzes. Quizzes are the only tool where you have to use a numeric grade so Moodle can compute a score.

You can edit or delete your new scale, using the icons in the Action column, until you start using it in one or more activities. The icons will then no longer appear.

When you give feedback using a nonnumeric scale, the activity does not appear in the total grade column. Instead, the word you select for the feedback appears in the grades list.

Effective Grade and Scale Practices

Grades and scales are important tools for providing feedback to your students. Using these tools effectively can help you create a more powerful learning environment.

Grade Practices

Backups

We recommend that you regularly download your gradebook for backup. Your system administrator should be backing up the entire server on a regular basis, but you can never be too certain. After all, your students will complain to you if they lose their grades, not to the system administrator.

To download your gradebook:

1. Click the Grades link in the Administration block.
2. Click one of the download buttons above the grades table.
3. Save the file somewhere on your computer.
4. Rename the file to include the date of the download.

If you follow the backup procedure on a regular basis, you will have a record of student grades if there is a catastrophic loss of data on the server. You can always recover students' grades up to that point in the semester if you have a regular backup.

Extra credit

Teachers often want to be able to award extra credit. Fortunately, the gradebook's advanced features make awarding extra credit easy.

To give an activity extra credit:

1. Click the Grades link in the Administration block. From the Grades page, click the Set Preferences tab.
2. Click the Set Categories tab. (If you've not yet enabled the advanced features, click the Set Preferences tab, then click the "Use Advanced Features" button to reveal additional tabs.)
3. Click the extra credit checkbox opposite the activity you want to award extra credit for.

4. Click the "Save changes" button.

Curves and grade letters

Grading on a curve and translating numeric grades to letter grades are important tools for adjusting student grades to reflect the performance of students relative to each other rather than an objective standard. When the subject matter is very difficult, or if you are trying a new course design, this can be very useful for maintaining fairness.

The gradebook provides two tools for adjusting grades after you have awarded a raw score. On the Set Categories page you can set a maximum score for a scored activity below the original point amount. This is equivalent to grading on the curve. Usually, you will set the curve after the scores are completed. You may want to set the curve to equal the highest grade in the class. If you set the curve score below the highest score, students who score above that level will receive a score higher than 100 percent. Allowing scores above 100 percent may be a useful way of rewarding students who have done exceptionally well, and would have otherwise blown the curve.

You can also use the grade-letters scale to curve the total class score. There's no law that an "A" grade has to be 90 percent and above. You can use whatever scale you want, as long as you are clear about it up front.

Jason: One of my favorite teachers in high school challenged us by making an "A" 93 percent and above. The modified scale encouraged the students to put that much more effort into their work to try to meet his higher standard.

Categories and Weights

If you have a course design where it is useful to give a lot of low-stakes practice (like weekly or daily homework), it can be difficult to balance the number of points possible in the practice with the number of points in higher-stakes assessments, like finals. For example, if you have 10 homework assignments, each worth 10 points, you will have 100 possible homework points. But if you want homework to equal only 10 percent of the final grade, your midterm and final would each have to be worth 450 points (for 900 points of assessment) to balance out the homework.

Categories and weights make it much easier to manage activity types and give them the correct weight when you calculate the total grade. If you want homework to be worth 10 percent of the total grade, create a "homework" category and give it a weight of 10 percent. Then create a "tests" category and give it a weight of 90 percent. You can then create two 100-point tests and assign them to the tests category. Put all of the homework assignments in the homework category. It won't matter how many points the homework assignments are worth. All of them together will only count as 10 percent of the final grade.

Creative Grade Uses

The gradebook can be as useful in a business context as it is in traditional education. Most business training tends to be shorter and more focused than traditional education, but scores are still important. Usually, managers and trainers are only interested in exceptional/pass/fail or other simple scales for both activities and final scores. But trainees will still want to be able to track their progress and see how they are performing.

Gradebook scores can also be used to track progress against competency models. Try creating a category for each competency and track student scores on activities designed to measure the students' performance against the performance standard.

Scale Practices

Scales give you the ability to provide qualitative, rather than quantitative, feedback, but they require careful wording. When creating scales, ensure that your word choices are meaningful to the students and provide information they can use to improve their performance in the future.