Opening the Black Box: 
Examining the “Micro-Physics” of Power in 
Teacher/Student Co-Evaluation of Academic 
Achievement

by
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Abstract

This project is a mixed methodology self-study of the power dynamics inherent in the teacher/student collaborative evaluation of academic achievement. This grading practice consisted of an evaluation phase following a period of instruction where the teacher collaborated with students to collect and evaluate assessment evidence in light of standards. Teacher and student then shared their results in a conference and collaboratively determined the letter grade.

The power dynamics of the conferences were examined through a Foucauldian power use and parrhesia framework to identify three types of power used by teacher and student: invitational, resistant, and neutral. Teacher use of power dominated the conferences, yet some students were able to resist the teacher's use of power sufficiently to have their voice heard.

Results of this study are encouraging and have proven useful in developing further iterations of this evaluation methodology.

Keywords: education; Foucault; collaboration; power; assessment; parrhesia
To my Family

who buoy me up.
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<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>3P</td>
<td>Participation Process Performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A4L</td>
<td>Assessment FOR Learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>ELA</td>
<td>English Language Arts</td>
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<tr>
<td>IRP</td>
<td>Integrated Resource Package</td>
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<tr>
<td>PLO</td>
<td>Prescribed Learning Outcome</td>
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<td>SBG</td>
<td>Standard Based Grading</td>
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<tr>
<td>SI</td>
<td>Student use of Invitational power</td>
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<td>SN</td>
<td>Student use of Neutral power</td>
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<tr>
<td>SR</td>
<td>Student use of Resistant power</td>
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<tr>
<td>TI</td>
<td>Teacher use of Invitational power</td>
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<tr>
<td>TN</td>
<td>Teacher use of Neutral power</td>
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<tr>
<td>TR</td>
<td>Teacher use of Resistant power</td>
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## Glossary

### 3P Grading System
A system of weighted grading where Participation is weighted at 50%; Progress at 30%; and Performance at 20%.

### Disciplinary Subjectivity
A Foucauldian term denoting the institutional use of power and knowledge to force an individual to conform to the expectations of the institution.

### Formative Assessment
1. An assessment task used to inform learning and instruction. Data produced is used both by the student and the teacher.
2. The use of assessment to inform learning and teaching.

### Grading Conference
A meeting between student and teacher to discuss and collaboratively determine the student’s level of academic achievement or grade.

### Grading Practice
The methodology used by a teacher to assess and evaluate a student’s level of academic achievement.

### Humanities
A course where the curriculums of English Language Arts and Social Studies are blended and students receive credit for both courses.

### Integrated Resource Package
The curriculum document supplied by the B.C. Ministry of Education.

### Invitational Use of Power
The use of power to encourage another to use power.

### Letter Grade
The code assigned to a particular level of academic achievement.

### Letter Grade Order
The government regulation defining the levels of academic achievement used in the British Columbia Public School system.

### Micro-Physics of Power
The specific and dynamic relationships created in and between parties when power is used by individuals, institutions, and organizations.

### Neutral Use of Power
The use of power that is neither overtly invitational, nor overtly resistant.

### Parrhesia
The telling of the truth to an audience or themselves with an eye toward self-discovery or improvement.

### Parrhesiastic Game
Foucault’s term for the discourse between parrhesiastes.

### Parrhesiastes
The truth teller in a parrhesiastic game.

### Prescribed Learning Outcome
The learning target or goal given by the B.C. Ministry of Education in the IRP.

### Resistant Use of Power
The use of power by one party to resist the use of power by another.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard Based Grading</th>
<th>A system based on learning goals and performance standards. One grade is given for each learning goal. Standards are criterion-referenced, and proficiency based. Criteria and targets are known to all. Only achievement is measured. Only summative assessments are used for grading purposes. Emphasizes the most recent evidence of learning. Uses median, mode, and the teacher’s professional judgement when determining grades. Uses only quality assessments with carefully recorded data. All aspects of grading are discussed with students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Summative Assessment</td>
<td>¹ An assessment task used to evaluate the extent to which a student has met learning targets or goals. ² The use of assessment to evaluate student academic achievement at the end of a learning cycle</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Inspiration

It was the end of another term of middle school. I was handing out report cards and dreading the wondering questions about grades and marks that inevitably followed. “Why did I get a C in French?” asked Sally. What did I do to get a B in Hum?” queried Fred. I was saddened yet encouraged that students were taking an interest in their grades, yet the grading and marking of students is a one-way street: students do the work and teachers decide its value. I wondered what could be done differently to make the process of grading more transparent to students. Surely there must be some way to involve students in their own assessment and evaluation; some way they could really understand where they are academically and how their grades are determined.

About seven or eight years ago I became frustrated with the way I was calculating grades. It may even have come out of conversations with students around report card time and their frustration and confusion with assessment and evaluation as depicted above. The traditional grading practice I was then using involved taking all the work a student did in a term, marking it to produce a single numerical score per item, weighting the various classifications of work (homework, assignment, test, etc.) so that each classification of work was worth a percentage of the total score, and then averaging the whole lot to produce a percentage score for the term. These percentage scores would then be converted to a letter grade based on tables provided by the provincial letter grade order (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2012). This was how I was graded in school and it was the way I was taught to grade as a teacher candidate. What were the issues with this system? Why was I no longer satisfied with it?

I found this practice arbitrary and the results produced failed to indicate with any degree of refinement what the student could and could not yet do and understand. I noticed that early scores brought down the total while those that came later in the term usually showed the student was able to demonstrate a higher knowledge and skill level. This skewed the final score so it failed to accurately represent what the student actually understood and could do by the end of the term. I also disliked the use of a zero score for work that was incomplete because even one zero brought the total down profoundly while the student likely showed the ability to perform the task satisfactorily in an assignment they had handed in. Properly, the information that the student wasn’t completing all the assignments belonged not in the Letter Grade, but in the Work Habit Grade (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2009).
So I did some research and discovered Steve Peha’s *Teaching That Makes Sense* (2018) blog and his *Three P Grading System* (1995). The three Ps are: Participation, Progress, and Performance. Participation in classroom activities was given a weight of 50%. Progress towards learning targets was worth 30% and Performance on learning tasks was given 20%. This contrasts with the traditional system where performance on learning tasks is all that counts. Students kept track of their work in a collection and this work was not all ‘marked’. Important pieces of work were marked using a rubric system that also contained standards based on learning targets. Convinced this system would help, I implemented it in the final term of that year and my students were transformed by the switch to the 3P system.

Some high achieving students didn’t like it because they didn’t understand the pedagogical reasons behind class participation having such a high weight. They were used to simply doing the work and getting good marks. Now, in order to get the good marks they were used to, they would have to participate in the activities and not rely so much on the end product. Process counted too.

Lower achieving students were encouraged by the switch to the 3P system because the effort and progress they were making counted. If they made progress and participated, then they would get a good grade even if the performance on the task was not perfect. Better than that, their early efforts would no longer count against them.

The most powerful part of the 3P system is not the shift in weighting, but in the collaborative conferences where student and teacher discuss the student’s learning and determine the appropriate letter grade together.

Student and teacher each prepared for the conferences by reviewing the work collected as well as participation and progress data and assigning each category a mastery score out of four. When the teacher and the student meet, the student must present their scores and the rationale or justification with reference to the evidence in the collection to the teacher. The teacher then presents the student with their evidence and scores. At this point the scores of the teacher and student are combined and averaged. The result is converted to a percentage and then to a letter grade based on the grade table provided by the province (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2012). If the teacher and the student agree on the grade produced, then the grade is assigned. If not,
then further discussion is entered into and the grade is negotiated. Consensus must be reached between the teacher and the student in order to assign the grade.

I was thrilled with this new system. I found students worked harder, learned more, and were more engaged in their learning because process was valued and counted in their grade. The conferences were especially enlightening. Students advocated for the grade they thought they ought to receive based on the evidence they had collected. This was a real-world critical thinking exercise. Rather than simply arguing for the highest grade, most students were honest in their reflections and self-assessments and were harder on themselves that I had been. Had I found the revolutionary grading practice that would involve students in their own assessment and evaluation and help them to really understand where they are academically and how their grades are determined? Unfortunately, no.

Yet, I discovered that such a system contravened provincial assessment and evaluation regulation. The School Act of B.C. (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2009) requires that term Letter Grades reflect only student performance as compared to standards. They are to indicate neither progress, nor participation. Participation is reported in the Work Habit evaluation. Progress is not included in the Letter Grade or the Work Habit and may only be reported anecdotally. Progress may be indicated when there has been a change in letter grade from the first report card to the second or third, however there is not a requirement to report on progress or lack thereof.

This discovery prompted more research and development of a grading practice that would legally allow my students to gain some input into their own evaluation while retaining portions of the 3P system I found powerful.
Assessment and Evaluation Process

Rationale

Ken O’Connor (2007) writes that grades and grading as we know them today have only existed for the past 165 years. Despite this relatively short history, the general public and teachers alike have embraced grades and grading as the \textit{de facto} indicator of academic achievement. Guskey and Bailey (2001) describe the historical evolution of grading practices in an American context. They say that grading developed as a method to deal with sorting and classifying the increasingly large numbers of students enrolling in schools under compulsory public education schemes emerging in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} Centuries. This period saw the introduction of the use of percentages, letter grades, pass-fail systems, grading on the curve and mastery learning systems.

O’Connor (2007, p. 130) classifies the following practices as ‘traditional’:

- System is based on assessment methods (quizzes, tests, homework, and so on). One grade is given for each subject.
- Assessments are norm-referenced and based on a percentage system. Criteria are often unclear or assumed.
- Use an uncertain mix of assessment of achievement, attitude, effort and behavior. Use penalties and extra credit. Include group scores.
- Score everything—regardless of purpose.
- Include every score, regardless of when it was collected. Assessments record the average—not the best—work.
- Calculate grades using the mean.
- Assessments vary in quality. Some evidence comes only from teacher recollection.
- The teacher makes decisions about grading and announces these decisions to students.

Grading has several purposes. Guskey and Bailey (2001) identify six major purposes for grading and reporting:

- To communicate the achievement status of students to parents and others
- To provide information that students can use for self-evaluation
• To select, identify, or group students for certain educational paths or programs
• To provide incentives for students to learn
• To evaluate the effectiveness of instructional programs
• To provide evidence of students' lack of effort or inappropriate responsibility.

They also say that while educators may agree on these six, there is little agreement as to which of these six is most important. This is problematic because reporting and grading systems try to satisfy these diverse purposes and usually fail to meet them well.

Both at the time of the study and currently, grading in BC public schools is governed by the British Columbia Ministry of Education Letter Grade Order M192-94 (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2012) which sets up three similar, yet different systems. Primary years (K-3) students receive only descriptive anecdotal comments prepared by the teacher and do not receive letter grades. Intermediate and early secondary years (4-9) students receive letter grades only. Upper secondary graduation program (10-12) students receive both a percentage and a letter grade. The provincial letter grade order requires that the letter grade reflect student achievement toward prescribed learning outcomes (PLO's) as detailed in the Integrated Resource Package (IRP) for each subject. While the order doesn't prescribe the methods teachers must use when arriving at this grade, this would suggest that the grading method best suited to the BC context would be Standards Based Grading (SBG).

Several authors have written about SBG in recent years and have put forward various definitions, methods and practices. Some common features of SBG are best summarized by O'Connor (2007) as:

• System is based on learning goals and performance standards. One grade is given for each learning goal.
• Standards are criterion-referenced and proficiency-based (using a limited number of levels to assess performance on a scale). Criteria and targets are known to all.
• Measure only achievement. No penalties or bonuses are given. Includes individual evidence only.
• Use only summative assessments for grading purposes.
- Emphasize the most recent evidence of learning when grading.
- Use median, mode, and professional judgment to determine grades.
- Use only quality assessment, and carefully record data.
- Discuss all aspects of grading with students.

The eighth characteristic of SBG mentioned by O’Connor, “Discuss all aspects of grading with students”, brings us to the involvement of students in the grading process. There are two main areas where this is likely to take place. The first is in the *formative assessment* of student learning. This is also known as *assessment for learning*. Among the most influential writers in this area have been Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, and Wiliam (2007), Black and Wiliam (2004; 2010), Marzano (2006), Davies (1992, 2001, 2007a, 2007b; 2000; 2000; 2001), and Stiggins (2005b, 2005a, 2009).

It may be useful at this point to define assessment for learning and/or formative assessment. Many practicing teachers and researchers use the terms interchangeably but there are some distinctions. In broad, general terms these assessment data are used to adjust learning and instruction to better meet students’ learning needs. Wiliam (2011) writes:

An assessment functions formatively to the extent that evidence about student achievement is elicited, interpreted and used by teachers, learners, or their peers to make decisions about the next steps in instruction that are likely to be better, or better founded, than the decisions they would have made in absence of that evidence.

Stiggins (2005a) differentiates assessment for learning from formative assessment when he writes:

Assessment FOR learning is different from what historically has been referred to as formative assessment. If formative assessment is about more frequent, assessment FOR learning is about more continuous. If formative assessment is about providing teachers with evidence, assessment FOR learning is about informing students about themselves. If formative assessment tells users who is and is not meeting state standards, assessment For learning tells them what progress each student is making toward meeting each standard *while the learning is happening* – when there’s still time to be helpful.

While the debate over definitions may seem unimportant, it is important to be clear about terms. In the course of this project and in my practice, I have conflated the
terms formative assessment and assessment for learning to describe the classroom assessment method I use. Therefore, I call the assessment method I use in my own practice formative assessment for learning. While not original, I have found this terminology useful as a way through the debate on definitions as I work to improve my teaching and my students' learning. What matters is that practitioners use a method of assessment that provides timely evidence of learning that both student and teacher can then act on to improve student learning. My concept of formative assessment for learning is a synthesis of Wiliam's formative assessment, Stiggins’ assessment FOR learning, and Standards Based Grading as described by Guskey & Bailey and O'Connor which bridges these two competing definitions to find a middle way I find useful in the field.

Formative assessment for learning is best described as a process of qualitative assessment of progress made by learners toward meeting specific learning standards. The goal of formative assessment for learning is to ensure students know what they are learning, how they are doing and what it will take to get them there. (Stiggins, 2005b)

I've identified several key elements involved in this process:

• Learning standards must be limited in number and clearly understood by both student and teacher

• Assessments must be tied to standards

• Student and teacher must collaborate in the collection and analysis of evidence of learning

• Feedback must be primarily descriptive and provide advice the learner can act upon in order to improve understanding and skills

Standards are key to using assessment to move learning forward (Stiggins, 2005b). Without students and teachers understanding the learning targets, it is impossible for the other elements of formative assessment for learning to come into play. Standards must be limited in number and expressed in language that students understand. Standards must also include descriptions of at least three levels of progress so that they can be used to guide instruction and learning as well as measure student progress toward meeting the standard (Cameron & Gregory, 2014). Unfortunately, the curriculum documents provided by the province at the time of this study did this poorly.
In British Columbia the IRP curriculum documents contained PLO’s that were intended to be learning outcomes or standards that were reflected in the assessment of learning. The first challenge came from the unwieldy number of PLO’s for each subject. In my study, I was working with middle school humanities classes. Humanities classes blend and combine the PLOs from both English Language Arts (ELA) and Social Studies (SS). The ELA curriculum document alone contained 39 distinct PLOs with 183 sub-PLOs for a total of 222 PLOs to teach and measure (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2007).

The PLOs are written to point out a direction to follow rather than a standard to work toward and are usually prefaced by “Students are expected to …” For example, ELA PLO C8 states:

“write and represent to explain and support personal responses to texts, by
 – making connections with prior knowledge and experiences
 – describing reactions and emotions
 – generating thoughtful questions
 – developing opinions using evidence” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2007)

To manage the volume of PLOs I was forced to take the 222 individual PLOs and rework them. I was guided by the ELA curriculum overview (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 88) and SS curriculum (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1997, pp. A2–A3) in my collapse of the overwhelming number of PLOs into 12 for ELA and 5 for SS. (see appendix A) For the term of the study I did not create descriptive standards for each level for each of the 17 learning outcomes I was using. I did use the BC Performance Standards for Grade Eight Writing (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2002) and created Standards for assignments as needed.

The second key element to formative assessment for learning is teacher and student collaboration in the collection and assessment of evidence of learning. Black & Wiliam (1998) point out that, “discussions in which pupils are led to talk about their understanding in their own ways are important aids to increasing knowledge and improving understanding.” This goes for both student and teacher. Students gain an increased understanding of their own learning while teachers gain an improved
understanding of what and how students have learned. It has long been advocated by researchers that students become more engaged in their own learning processes. (Wiliam, 2011, p. 145) This is best accomplished through student self-assessment. (Gregory et al., 2000)

The third key element of formative assessment for learning is that feedback must be primarily descriptive and provide advice the learner can act upon to improve their learning. Wiliam (2011) and Davies (2001, 2007b) both indicate that feedback is most effective and results in greatest learning when it is descriptive rather than evaluative. Not only should feedback be descriptive but also ought to include a “recipe for further action” so that the learner will use the feedback to improve performance (Davies, 2001, 2007b). Feedback alone will not increase learning or raise standards. That is up to the learner alone. Ensuring assessments and feedback are tied to commonly understood standards helps the learner apply the feedback effectively.

The fourth key element of formative assessment for learning is that assessments be tied to standards. If the standards are the targets or destination, then the assessments of progress and performance must be tied directly to them. A single assessment may assess progress toward several standards at once. If the target of the assignment or assessment is not clear to both student and teacher, then it is far less likely that the student will understand what learning they are demonstrating by doing the assignment and the teacher will not know for which learning standard or target the assignment or assessment is meant to provide evidence.

**Practice**

Based on the research outlined above, my grading practice evolved to consists of an assessment phase and an evaluation phase by the time the investigation was conducted. During the assessment phase, I focused on providing students feedback on their learning so that the student and I understand where they are, where they are headed, and how to get there. This assessment process is not the focus of this study although it inevitably forms part of the background of the study as it through this assessment phase that much of the data analyzed in the evaluation phase is gathered.
This study focuses on how power/knowledge is used by both teacher and students in evaluating student academic achievement. It is important to understand the process we used to collaborate in evaluating student academic achievement and expressing this as a letter grade. The essential question that guided our evaluation of student academic achievement is: *To what extent does an individual student’s learning meet the applicable standard?*

A process of backward design was used to plan and implement instruction. It is ‘backward’ in that the teacher begins by identifying a set of learning standards for a lesson, unit, and/or course and plans instruction that will result in students learning the concepts or content identified. Assessment and evaluation of student learning then becomes a question of determining to what extent a student has successfully mastered the identified concepts and content. The assessment data is used by the teacher to guide further instruction and by the student to guide further learning. Evaluation and grading at the end of each term is done by measuring student learning against the applicable standards for the units taught.

In the system used during the study, students collected evidence of their learning in a growth portfolio very similar to the 3P collection. Collected materials included assignments and assessment tasks, items from the students’ notebooks, and reflexive writing. Students were asked to assess some assignments and assessments while they were in process and also before handing them in for assessment by the teacher. I gathered my own evidence of their learning through observations, in process conferences and informal discussion with students, and assessed finished written and verbal assignments and assessment tasks. I shared my assessments with students through immediate verbal feedback and descriptive feedback written on their returned work.

To determine a student’s letter-grade we gathered and analyzed assessment and evaluation data. This data came in many diverse forms but primarily consists of the assignments the student completes to demonstrate their learning as well as test and quiz data. Anecdotal and observational data were also collected, yet this data was most often used formatively to intervene in the learning process and improve ongoing learning rather than for evaluation at the end of a learning cycle.
While my students demonstrated their learning through similar assessment products as other educators, by using a version of SBG, each assessment product allowed me to collect several data points in several different categories or ‘standards’. For example, a single essay allowed me to assess student learning across eight or ten different standards. This assessment data was then shared with students, so they and I knew to what extent they had met the associated learning standards and, by extension, what they needed to do to reach the next level.

Most frequently these data were communicated to the student through an assessment rubric where the various levels of achievement are described. The student saw where their work placed in a particular standard and read the description associated with the standard as well as the description of the other levels in the same standard. In addition to the rubric, students were typically given descriptive feedback where I elaborated on points from the rubric and gave actionable suggestions for students to use on their next assessment. I felt this combination of rubric and feedback allowed students to envision learning as a process and the assessment products they produced as links in a chain where they could show growth and progress towards the associated learning standards.

Evaluation, on the other hand, is the process of determining and describing – usually through a single letter-grade or numeric score – a student’s academic achievement for a particular time period. My method of producing this single letter-grade was a mixed method collaborative process where both student and teacher analyzed collected evidence of learning and came together in a grading conference to share their analyses and collaboratively determine the grade that best described their learning at that point in time. This determination was guided by the letter grade descriptors in the BC Letter Grade order. (see Appendix B)

In my analysis process, I took the numeric scores collected in each standard, identified the mean, and produced a final score for that standard that I weighted more heavily toward the later scores in the learning cycle. Once this had been done for each standard, I then determined the mean of the final scores to determine the letter grade. This process is modeled on R. Marzano’s from his book Transforming Classroom Grading (2000) At this point I compared the description of the letter grade as per the Ministerial order with my qualitative knowledge and understanding of the student’s
achievement that term. If, in my professional judgement, the letter grade produced by Standards Based Grading is inaccurate then I adjusted the letter grade accordingly. This is the process and product that I shared with students during the grading conferences. (see Appendix D)

Students undertook a more qualitative and reflexive process to analyze the evidence of learning they had collected in their growth portfolios. They reviewed their collections of evidence and reflected on their achievement. They compared their work with the grade descriptors given by the province and determined what grade they ought to receive based on the evidence they had collected. This process was slightly modified from first term to second term of the study period so that students were asked to reflect and bring evidence from the areas of reading, writing, and social studies content to support their grade determination.

Therefore, the letter grade communicated to parents and other stakeholders via a report card is produced through a mixed methods collaborative investigation into that student’s learning that includes student self-assessment and interview data as well as assessment data collected by the teacher. However, I was not yet satisfied. As I implemented this practice, I began to wonder if I was being as progressive as I assumed.
Investigation Process and Practice

Enter Michel Foucault

I first encountered Michel Foucault when reading *I, Pierre Riviere* for my graduate coursework. Gradually, I realized that, while his methodology seemed to be historical, his subject matter was more sociological or psychological. His later work deals with the formation and construction of self-identity or subjectivity and how society and social institutions interact through relations of power (*pouvoir*) to discipline individuals so they conform to societal expectations in terms of their own self-identity or subjectivity. This institutional use of power and knowledge can be termed Disciplinary Subjectivity.

One such disciplinary institution is the school. Public schools, as institutions of the state, occupy a particularly powerful position in society given that children are compelled to attend, and the curriculum is mandated by the state. Within the British Columbian context, the teacher is guided by the IRP for the course and government regulation yet is allowed significant discretion as to their instruction and evaluation methodology. Nevertheless, there remains a weight of tradition and customary practice that serves to discipline teachers in their methodology.

This weight of tradition is not easily resisted, yet Foucault writes, somewhat paradoxically, that power must be resisted in order to exist and that he characterizes power in terms of relations of power (Foucault, 1995). No-one can have power, but agents can only use power in relationships of power with other individuals and institutions. These relationships of power Foucault calls the “micro-physics” of power (Foucault, 1995) and they come into play when the institution (school, prison, etc.) uses power in relations with an individual and vice-versa.

Since power cannot exist without resistance, one important way individuals execute power in relation with institutions or authority is through various technologies of the self or techniques for constructing their own self-identity. In the educational context, one very important power relationship between the individual student and the institution, in the form of the teacher, occurs through assessment and evaluation. This *micro-physics* is one way to conceive of the power dynamic present in the student -teacher relationship, especially when it pertains to evaluation and grading of the student’s
academic achievement. These are the relations of power that I explore and examine in this study.

In Foucault’s later works *The History of Sexuality: Care of the Self* (1988), *Technologies of the Self* (1988), and particularly, *Fearless Speech* (2001), he examines several practices from ancient Greece that served to construct self-identity. The most important of these is the practice of truth-telling or *parrhesia*. What these practices do is help the individual construct their *self*.

Identity and selfhood, for Foucault, are imbedded within the dynamics of power/knowledge. Therefore, there are multiple selves that any individual can embody depending on nature of the power/knowledge situation in which they find themselves. Schirato, Danaher and Webb (2012) write: “… subjects become individuals precisely because of power. Power, manifested particularly through discourses of truth and knowledge, makes us what we are. Human beings-as-subjects are therefore contingent, rather than innate or natural.” It is this notion of subjectivity being contingent upon relations of power and knowledge that serves as the theoretical framework of my project.

Foucault wrote and lectured extensively on *parrhesia* in the later part of his life. *Parrhesia* can be conceived of as a type of game in which the *parrhesiastes* is engaged in telling the truth to an audience or themselves (Schirato et al., 2012, pp. 190–191). This situation is replicated in my grading methodology where students were required to reflect on their learning (*parrhesia* with themselves as audience) and then share that with the teacher (*parrhesia* with the teacher as audience). An essential condition of *parrhesia* is that there is some risk in telling the truth. This condition is satisfied as the student’s evaluation letter grade is at stake and the truthfulness of the *parrhesiastes* is checked by the teacher’s discussion of the evidence for learning and the comparison of the student’s self-evaluation with the teacher’s evaluation of the student.

However, on page 134 of *Fearless Speech* Foucault suggests, after Plutarch, that the role of truth teller (*parrhesiastes*) in personal relationships relates more to the role of teacher in the grading conference than that of student telling the truth to power. This is because it is the teacher who has more access to power than the student. This is a much more Socratic and Epicurean conception of *parrhesia* than the *demos* form I outlined above.
In this Socratic form of parrhesia the teacher is the truth-teller and must counteract the self-flattering student. While rare, this situation of role reversal takes place on occasion and is usually somewhat tenser than that where the student is taking on the role of truth teller or where the student’s understanding and self-knowledge leads them to undervalue their progress and achievement. Students who come to the grading conference with an inflated conception of their own achievement levels are participating in this type of game.

It is then that the teacher’s role becomes that of an external truth teller who is able to compassionately, even lovingly, correct the student’s self-delusion. Students may have attempted to guess at or have based their self-concept on the feedback given by the teacher over the term, yet they may also fail to interpret this information accurately and so delude themselves into unrealistic self-knowledge.

Students are truth-tellers in so far as they know what they are saying is the truth as they understand it. When conferencing with their teacher and telling the teacher their truth students run the risk of being corrected and suffering psychological injury to their self-concept if their self-concept is questioned. When questioned the student’s self-concept could be found to be deflated (less than) or inflated (more than) as compared to the teacher’s concept of the student. The consequences of truth telling are most negative for those whose self-concept is found to be inflated in comparison to the teacher’s conception. These students suffer the greatest negative psychological effects as their self-concept is revealed to be inflated from the teacher’s perspective and that they have been flattering themselves. They are then required to revise their self-concept and accept that their academic achievement is not what they had led themselves to believe. On the other hand, students whose self-concept is found to be deflated as compared to the teacher’s conception receive a psychological boost to their self-esteem. Those whose self-concept is found to be in accordance with the teacher’s conception are also given a slight boost. This is the risk students take when entering into the parrhesiastic game with their teachers.

In short, my students and I are playing a sort of parrhesiastic game or game of truth when we enter into the grading conference. We come together and speak the truth to one another with regards to the learning that has (or hasn’t) taken place that term. This fits within the Foucauldian conception of power/knowledge as dynamic and
contingent. It is this conception of power/knowledge and how it is used by both parties in
the parrhesiastic game that frames my analysis of the grading method I employed during
the study period.

Research Questions

I became interested in the relations of power that exist in the teacher-student
relationship developed through the use of the grading practice I had developed. To
investigate these relationships, the following questions were posed:

- What are the micro-physics of power\(^1\) that exist between student and
teacher when collaborating to determine student term letter grades?
- To what extent are students able to become parrhesiastes vis à vis the
teacher through this collaboration?

Study Site Description

This study was conducted at a large suburban grade 6-8 middle school located in
the lower mainland of British Columbia. At the time of the study, there were
approximately 780 students and 30 staff learning and working at the school. The student
population was made up of two broad categories: approximately 2/3 of the population
were bussed to school from a newly developed area of relatively high socio-economic
status and the local population was mostly of lower middle class and working class
socio-economic status. The local area surrounding the school was mixed single family
and multi-family residential, commercial and light industrial while the newly developed
area was almost exclusively single family residential. This resulted in a broad
socioeconomic spectrum being represented in the student body.

Middle schools typically group the students and teachers into teams consisting of
several classrooms. At this site, there were six teams, with one team having six classes
and the remainder having four classes. Four of the teams were blended teams with each
classroom being formed of a mixture of grade 6s and 7s. Two of the teams each
consisted of four classrooms of grade 8s. The teaching teams were given the

\(^1\) The specific and dynamic relationships created in and between parties when power is used by
individuals, institutions and organizations
responsibility to devise their timetable and the division of labour amongst the teachers on the team.

My team had been working together for several years and was well established at the time of the study. We divided the work by ‘platooning’ the classes. I taught Humanities (English and Social Studies) to my own homeroom class and my teaching partner’s class while my teaching partner would teach both classes Math and Science. This method of dividing the teaching labour allows some specialization and was common practice at this school at the time of the study. The study took place in my classroom and I recruited participants from both my homeroom class and that of my teaching partner as the study concerns my grading practice in Humanities.

Participants

I recruited five participants for the study, one female and four males. All were 13 years of age at the time of the study. All were of relatively high socio-economic status. Pseudonyms are used throughout the study to protect their identities.

Ricky is a 13-year-old male of mixed Japanese and Caucasian heritage. Soccer is his passion. He is enrolled in Kumon Math and music and Japanese lessons outside of school. He is studious and hard working. He achieves high marks through effort rather than innate talent. He has a growth mindset. He is a pleaser and follows instructions. He is very concerned with quantitative measures of academic progress. He is intelligent. He is small in stature yet tenacious. He is well liked, polite and works well with others. He is a follower more than a leader, yet he is unafraid to use his voice and ask questions. He is active, but not hyper. Interested, engaged and conscientious are three words that come to mind when I think of Ricky.

Max is a 13-year-old male who is intellectual, academically minded, athletic, yet not identified as gifted. He is interested in learning, yet also focused on grades. He values concrete quantitative measures of learning and progress. He’s naturally high achieving and hasn’t faced much seriously challenging work in is academic career to date. He is content to work to his abilities and not push himself to achieve more. He is cynical in some ways and seems older and world weary beyond his years. He is quick to judge. He doesn’t see the value in learner focused teaching methods such as inquiry
learning, and he “likes percentages” and the sorting and ranking aspects of school grading. He likes to appear ‘smart’ and is dismissive of others needing more time or instruction. He is a quick thinker, and he is analytical and logical. He is an excellent reader and writes expository non-fiction and argument well. He is well spoken and popular within his small circle of friends.

Jane is a 13-year-old female who is conscientious and caring. She is interested in learning more than in grades although grades and doing well are important to her. She immigrated from Australia last year and this is her first Canadian school experience. She has a growth mindset. She is neither popular nor unpopular. She is well liked and has a small circle of friends. She is a good friend, works well with others, and contributes positively to group and class activities. She is interested in how the world works and has confidence enough to make her own way in it. She has an artistic sensibility and prefers to write in cursive. She is well rounded and social. She is bright and cheerful. She wants to do well and make progress. She asks very insightful questions and listens well.

Sam is a 13-year-old male who is a kind, friendly and organized leader in the classroom. He has a genuine interest in learning and a growth mindset. He is not particularly concerned with grades, yet he still prefers to get good ones. He works well with others to a point. He can become frustrated with a lack of direction and progress. He is well organized in his schoolwork yet can be over committed and ‘stretched’ due to his extracurricular activities. He takes students new to the school under his wing. He is popular yet not conceited. He is well liked by both genders. He asks good questions and listens well too. He takes the time to understand the grading process and make actionable suggestions for improvement. He is funny, charming and a ‘kidder’ with a winning smile.

Bobby is an athletic 13-year-old male who has an identified learning disability. His LD manifests itself in his written output and he is encouraged to word process his work as part of his learning adaptations although he is resistant to using his computer. His abrasive personality and underdeveloped social skills sometimes lead to conflict with his peers. He feels he is always correct and is unwilling to accept that he may be mistaken or has done something incorrectly. He is insightful and easy to speak with from an adult perspective. He has a temper and is not always able to regulate his behavior to match the situation. He finds de-escalation of conflict challenging. He quickly
understands content and concepts yet finds expressing and demonstrating his knowledge and understanding challenging. He is impatient with himself and others. He has a very fixed mindset. He plays volleyball, basketball and ice hockey and is from the more affluent part of the catchment. He is very serious about most things in his life.

**Methods of investigation**

This study is framed as a case study examining the power relations involved in the grading methodology outlined above. I collected data from two main sources: transcribed participant interviews conducted during the first and second term grading conferences and a transcribed focus group interview involving all participants and myself.

The grading conferences were conducted in an open classroom environment. The interviewee met with me at my desk in the left-hand rear of the room while their classmates were engaged in preparing their own conference materials and/or other seatwork. I was able to monitor the class and conduct the interview with the participant at the same time. From time to time, conferences were interrupted with students asking questions or seeking to leave the room etc. The recorder was clearly visible to both participant, researcher and classmates.

The focus group was conducted after school hours in the classroom with only the researcher and the participants present. We met around a table so were all able to see and hear each other. The recording device was placed in the center of the table.

The interview protocol for the first term grading conference is based on the students’ self-reflection and assessment document prepared by students prior to the grading conference. (see appendix C) The first term conference contains five phases. Phase A: Student presentation of their assessment data; Phase B: Student presentation of their self-evaluation; Phase C: Teacher presentation of assessment data; Phase D: Teacher presentation of their evaluation of the student; and Phase E: a negotiation to determine a suitable letter grade based on the grade descriptors mandated by the provincial regulation.

The focus group protocol is designed to elicit the participants’ thoughts and impressions of the methods used to determine their grade in the first term. Questions
focus on having students report how they understand the process and how it may differ from that of other teachers they have had. I was also interested in what aspects of the process they liked and which they did not and why that might be the case. Students were asked to assess the accuracy of the grade reported in the first term and who they think report card grades are for (which stakeholders etc.). The focus group concludes with a discussion of who ought to have the final say on the grade and what students would need in order to have the final say.

One outcome of the focus group was that the protocol for the second term’s grading conference was altered based on Sam’s suggestion that students present their evaluation and evidence of their learning at the outset of the conference. This altered protocol combines Phases A and B as the student presents their self-evaluation and then supports this claim with evidence and explanation drawn from their collection of work. Phases C, D, and E remain discreet and the protocol unfolds from this point as it does in the first term grading conferences.

Analysis and interpretation of the interview data proceeded through two distinct rounds of coding.

The initial round of coding consisted of close reading and annotating the interview and focus group transcripts. This close reading and annotation went through several iterations as the initial reading of the text data resolved into the segmentation of the data and the assigning of initial codes/comments. These coded segments were then examined to reduce overlap and redundancy and a short list of codes was produced. After examining these codes, it became apparent that both teacher and student were using power in three distinct ways: Invitational, Resistant, and Neutral.

The second round aimed to refine this analysis by coding speech acts by their apparent power use and user. I selected three colours to represent each type of power use and a light and dark shade of the colour to differentiate student use from teacher use. I then read and underlined the transcripts to code the text segments in terms of power use and identify which speech activities employed which type of power use. From this coded dataset I was able to select those quotes which support my analysis of the power use in the grading conference process.
Following these rounds of coding, I created a matrix of power use for each phase of the grading conference. I did this by visually scanning the colour coded interview transcripts and identifying which power use by whom was most dominant, less dominant and least dominant and then placing these rankings into a table. While interesting, this lacked precision, so I counted each type of power use in each phase of each conference and placed these in a spreadsheet to produce visualizations of this quantitative data. These visualizations allowed patterns obscured in the coded dataset and in the matrix to be seen and the analysis and interpretation of these patterns to determine the microphysics of power and use of parrhesia.
Analysis and Findings

The grading conferences consist of five main phases: Student presentation of their own assessment data (phase A); Student presentation of their self-evaluation (phase B); Teacher presentation of his assessment data (phase C); Teacher presentation of his evaluation (phase D); and the negotiation of the grade (Phase E).

There are three main ways power is used in these conferences: neutral use of power inviting the other to use power; resisting the other’s use of power; and. The power use can also be categorized by the user. Therefore, there are six categories in total: student use of neutral power (SN); teacher use of neutral power (TN); student use of invitational power (SI); teacher use of invitational power (TI); student use of resistant power (SR); and teacher use of resistant power (TR).

I characterize speech activities encouraging the other party to use of power as invitational. Invitational power use submits the user to subjectification by the other party and subordinates the user’s identity in relation to the other party. For example, one party may agree with the other party’s statements and thus invite the other party to continue. Invitational use of power also consists of open invitations to contribute to the discourse such as, “What do you think?” Invitational use of power can also become coercive when one party insists that the other use power when they remain silent or passive. It is in cases such as these where the invitational use of power shifts to resistant power use.

Speech activities that are openly confrontational are clearly a resistant use of power. Resistant power use intends to subjectify and dominate the other party. This resistance may consist of defiance, silence, balking, questioning, proposing alternatives etc.

Using power to further one’s goals or reach one’s objectives in co-operation or collaboration with the other party I call neutral power use. Neutral power use is gentle. It doesn’t appear overtly dominating or submissive. Neutral power use is focused on maintaining the stasis of one’s self-image while co-operating with the other party. Neutral power use may be slightly invitational or slightly resistant, but it doesn’t cross the line into open resistance or invitation.
First Term Grading Conferences

Phase A

Figure 1. Overall Power Use Distribution, First Term Conference: Phase A

Figure 2. Power Use Distribution by Case, First Term Conference: Phase A
Power use in Phase A – where students present their own data – consists mainly of neutral power use that is usually balanced between both participants. However, the initial stages of this phase prove challenging for participants as roles and expectations are sorted out. Bobby’s case provides an interesting and revealing example. Bobby finds the opening stage of phase A confusing as he responds to my opening invitation to use power and state what he is most proud of with resistant, then neutral, then invitational power use in his first utterance alone:

TEACHER: So, what are you most proud of this term?

BOBBY: I’ve . . . Nothing that I’ve demonstrated really stands out to me. It’s just all ‘okay work’. If I do well on the um test that I just handed in to you I think that would be the thing that I’m most proud of.

His statement that ‘nothing stands out’ resists my invitation to share. The comment that it is all ‘okay’ is neutral and Bobby’s deference to teacher assessment in the last portion of the statement invites me, as teacher, to use power.

This confusion eventually subsides as we establish that he’s ‘proud of everything’. From this point onward, the power use is mostly neutral on the part of both teacher and student with occasional invitational use as he shares where he has made progress and what he continues to find challenging.

The second most common use of power in Phase A is to invite the other participant to use power. In Ricky’s case this occurs in the opening stages of this phase as the following excerpt demonstrates:

TEACHER: And you can start anytime you like

RICKY: Okay, so I just read this, right?

TEACHER: Yup

RICKY: Ummmm . . . I’m most proud of my language skills test ‘cause the second time I got 31/32

TEACHER: Uh hum

RICKY: But the other time I got way lower score, so it shows my improvement.

TEACHER: Yup
RICKY: And should I give you the proof?

TEACHER: Yeah, you can show me the proof.

RICKY: This is the 31/32 and uhnn

TEACHER: And (unintelligible) /34 Awesome!

RICKY: So that was my proud and my showing progress ...

TEACHER: Yes, so you’ve got two in one there.

Ricky clarifies that he is to read from his prepared reflection sheet and in so doing he invites me to use power. Instead, I invite Ricky to proceed. Ricky takes up this invitation and outlines some of the work he has done of which he feels most proud. Ricky does make use of teacher generated assessment data, yet Ricky takes the lead in this conference and points out where he has made progress.

In addition, this opening discourse shows the teacher using power invitationally by yielding to and encouraging the student’s use of power in ways that are valued by the teacher. Notice the way Ricky checks with the teacher to confirm that his way of using power meets the teacher’s expectations. In this way the student invites teacher use of power and the teacher uses power to encourage and invite the student to use power themselves, while at the same time using power to influence the student to use power in ways that conform to the teacher’s expectations. This invitational use of power by the teacher is always present in the relationship no matter which case we examine.

We have seen that Bobby’s initial speech activity includes all three modes of power use. He resists my use of power on two other occasions in Phase A. This resistance to teacher use of power also occurs when students resist my invitation to use power, but this is far less frequent than other uses of power across all cases. In three of the four cases – Bobby, Jane, and Max – students resist teacher use of power in the opening stages of Phase A and shift to inviting teacher use of power by the later stages of the Phase. Jane’s Phase A is interesting as I use invitational and neutral power in this opening stage while she uses predominately neutral power until she is called upon to comment on what she found challenging. She abruptly shifts to resisting my use of power when she says:
JANE: The Rome test was hard because I had to rely on someone else’s notes in order for me to pass. Like there were a few questions where the notes I had to look at hadn’t been written down.

TEACHER: Uh’hum

JANE: And so ’cause of that, I couldn’t answer some of those questions.

She resists my use of power by expressing her frustration in the way I had constructed that particular assessment task. I had the students participate in a co-operative jigsaw activity where students take notes from a portion text and then collaborate on a shared set of notes for the entire text. I then gave the class an open notes quiz and Jane is frustrated by the fact that I forced her to rely on others for the notes. Jane’s phase A does quickly assume the common pattern of neutral and invitational power use once I reveal that the score on the quiz is being used formatively to assess notetaking skills.

Jane resists my use of power by shifting responsibility for an unsatisfactory score on an assessment to others, including myself. In Max’s case he initially resists my invitations to share his own understanding of his learning in two distinct ways: He opts to minimally engage in the discourse while presenting only quantitative assessment data produced by the teacher in response to my request for what he is “most proud of.” This indicates that he is very concrete and analytical and bases his self-perception on the teacher’s assessment data.

Rarely do I actively resist student use of power in Phase A. The one example of this is in Bobby’s case where the latter half of phase A drifts from the interview protocol into a discussion of the computer Bobby is supposed to be using as part of his adapted program. Bobby hasn’t been turning in assignments and hasn’t been using his computer. It is my feeling that if he used his computer his rate of work completion and ‘lost’ assignments would drop. He reads this as an accusation and jumps to defend himself in a series of resistant speech activities. This is one of the few instances where I use resistant power to openly challenge student use of power. I refuse to accept his excuses and instead provide work arounds to enable him to use a computer in class.

While there are examples of resistant use of power on both the student and teacher’s part, it does not dominate. Instead, teacher and student seem to be
cooperating to develop an understanding of what the student has experienced in their learning thus far in the course. There are examples of negotiation of role and responsibility and some, not unexpected, discomfort on the part of the students in assuming roles to which they are unaccustomed. This may lead to some resistant power use on the part of the student in the opening stages of this phase, but this is usually transformed into neutral power use by the conclusion of this phase. Student and teacher invite each other to use power and it is clear the teacher does more inviting than the students as students need encouragement to assume these new roles and responsibilities and join in the parrhesiastic game of speaking truth to power.

**Phase B**

Power use in Phase B – where students present their own evaluation – is less consistent across the four cases than in phase A. This phase of the first term grading conference is also typically shorter, sometimes significantly shorter, than phase A. The conference interview protocol has me introduce the phase with neutral/invitational power use by asking the students to indicate whether they think their achievement thus far is “minimal, satisfactory, good, very good or outstanding”.

![Figure 3. Overall Power Use Distribution, First Term Conference: Phase B](image)

Figure 3. Overall Power Use Distribution, First Term Conference: Phase B
Figure 4. **Power Use Distribution by Case, First Term Conference: Phase B**

Bobby and Max’s cases are generally a balance of teacher use of invitational power, teacher use of neutral power and student use of neutral power. Max immediately responds to my invitation for a self-evaluation with a clear, “I think very good, between very good and outstanding.” His neutral power use is non-confrontational and reinforces his own self-identity as a high achieving student. I agree and then invite Max to expand on his reasoning and justification for the evaluation with “Well, what are you basing that opinion on?” Max responds with some clear examples that are also neutral use of power. However, both Max and Bobby see the teacher as a ‘giver of marks’ and the authority in the assessment of their school work and evaluation of their academic achievement. Rather than basing their self-assessment on their own, internal understanding of their progress as I invited them to, they base their self-evaluation on external, teacher produced assessment scores. In Max’s conference, I initially resist this use of power, but realize that he does not have any other form of evidence to offer. This causes the conversation to shift from the student’s self-evaluation to the presentation of the teacher’s assessment data.

Unlike Max and Bobby, Jane and Ricky resist my invitation to give their self-evaluations. This is particularly evident in Jane’s case because she actively resists giving her evaluation and I must use power to invite her to settle on single description/letter grade. Even then she resists and uses power to avoid specifying:
JANE: Um, I don’t want to sound self-absorbed, but maybe (unintelligible) leaning towards the middle.

TEACHER: Between good and very good?

JANE: Yeah.

TEACHER: Yeah? Well . . .

JANE: I don’t (unintelligible)

At this point I get exasperated and shift the conversation abruptly to my assessment data and evaluation. My resistant use of power devalues her voice and authority and places my understanding as superior to hers. In doing this rather than being more patient, I lose an opportunity to hear her. She uses resistant power to shut down and give only single word responses for virtually the remainder of the conference.

Ricky’s reaction to the invitation to share his self-evaluation is also resistant but not in the same way as Jane’s. He continually invites me to use power to confirm his evaluation and I resist this invitation until he eventually states his own evaluation:

TEACHER: Now, what about your letter grade. What do you think. What describes your learning this term? Minimally, Satisfactorily, Good, Very Good or Outstanding? (lists them off on fingers)

RICKY: Um, Well considering the only thing I did bad was the map package right

TEACHER: Hmmm

RICKY: The rest I got mostly good, didn’t I?

TEACHER: Did you?

RICKY: Yeah, ‘cause I got four three and three for the responses and

TEACHER: Okay

RICKY: On the Roman History I got 56

TEACHER: And you work well in groups, looks like

RICKY: Yeah

TEACHER: Yeah

TEACHER: So, it looks like we’re trying to decide between very good and outstanding
RICKY: Yeah, and also on my Language Skills test I got 31 so

TEACHER: Awesome

RICKY: Yeah

TEACHER: So, how is your performance this term? Is it ‘very good’ or ‘outstanding’?

RICKY: Ohhhhh, I don’t know.

TEACHER: Well, I want to hear what you think before I tell you what I think.

RICKY: Depends on how much the map package has involved in the . . .

TEACHER: Well, we’re just looking in general.

RICKY: In general, considering I blew one of the four main things, right? I would say outstanding?

What this exchange shows is that Ricky, like Max and Bobby, bases his self-evaluation on teacher generated assessment data. He is also very hesitant to use power and express an evaluation. Instead he resists the invitation and, in turn, invites me to use power to express me evaluation. He resists strongly with his “Ohhhhh, I don’t know” statement and I have to use both invitational and resistant power to compel him to give an evaluation. He eventually does, but only after one last ditch attempt to avoid giving one and my reassurance that we are not looking for a calculation, but a generalized statement. He even appends a question tag to his last statement that invites me to use power and present my assessment. In this phase of the conference, Ricky shows he would likely defer to my assessment, but, interestingly, when we transition to Phase C and I share my assessment data, he challenges it with his use of resistant power.

Phase C

In Phase C – where the teacher presents their assessment data – power use is very consistent across cases. Teacher use of neutral power dominates this phase followed by teacher use of invitational power in discussing the assessment data. Student use of power is minimal. Bobby and Max only use neutral power in a few instances, Jane uses invitational power in one instance, and Ricky uses some resistant power.
In Ricky’s case my assessment data consists of a collection of ‘A’, ‘B’ and ‘C’ level grades across several learning outcomes, and he immediately challenges the ‘C’ grades and wants to know where they are from. Once I explain that they indicate his level of mastery in the use of writing conventions and mechanics, he is able to process the information and understand how they fit into the larger picture of his learning. This exchange features my use of neutral power in response to his resistance and
questioning of my assessment data. I gently show that the lower grades identify an area in which he can improve and suggest ways in which he may do so. This formative use of the assessment data is critical in the first term as the school year as 2/3 of the year remains and there is plenty of room for progress and growth.

Ricky is the only student who uses power to resist my assessment in this phase of the first term grading conferences. In every case I use power in a neutral or invitational way and my use of power dominates the discourse. Students generally use neutral or invitational power in this phase through speech activities that consist of single words or phrases that indicate agreement and encouragement. Max, for example, agrees with my assessment data by saying, “Okay” and “Socials is my favourite subject, so … I’m happy with it. I like it.” He also expresses a desire to work on improving the area identified as weakest and with my conjecture that a single letter grade is a poor representation of a student’s learning.

Phase D

Phase D – where the teacher presents their evaluation – is, unsurprisingly, dominated by teacher use of neutral power. There are some instances of student use of invitational and neutral power and no instances of either students or teacher using resistant power. This is also the shortest phase of the grading conference and typically involves the teacher speaking and the student listening. Jane and Ricky allow me to present my evaluation virtually without interruption, whereas Bobby and Max speak up and we engage in a turn-taking dialogue. When the students use power in this phase it is to invite the teacher to use power or to use power in a neutral, co-operative fashion. With Bobby and Max, I work through my grade calculation with them and invite them into my process of determining their grade based on my data, and in return they invite me to use power by agreeing with my methods and results. With Jane and Ricky, I simply present my analysis and evaluation without inviting them into the process. Ricky simply agrees with my evaluation while Jane immediately initiates the negotiation phase of the grading conference.

The differences between the two types of interactions in this phase is stark. I tailor my use of power to that of the student, so I am more coercive in my use of power
when the student is more compliant and invitational, and I am more invitational and co-operative when the student is more resistant.

This seems counter-intuitive. I think I would not need to be coercive with those students who are compliant and would have to be coercive with those who resist. However, this intuitive power use pattern would be, upon reflection, more likely to cause a power struggle and, to keep things nonconfrontational, I invert what might be expected. I use more coercive power in order to maintain the dominant position with the compliant students while inviting those who are resistant to my way of thinking. This seemingly counter-intuitive power use pattern on my part shows us that the micro physics of power is far from fixed and is contingent. Each party in the relationship uses power to influence the other. The fact that I adjust my use of power in each case to match the other party’s is indicative of this contingency. This is further demonstrated in the final, negotiation, phase of the grading conferences as student and teacher work toward the determination of the student’s grade for this term.

Phase E

It is in the final phase, Phase E, where the negotiation of the grade takes place, where we see the most diverse power use. In three cases, Ricky, Bobby and Jane’s, we see teacher use of invitational and neutral power at the fore; however, each response is unique.
Ricky uses neutral and invitational power yet never uses resistant power. This is likely due to the bell ringing during Phase C and the discourse becoming rushed at this stage. At the end of Phase E I invite a reassessment of his grade:

TEACHER: Based on our conversation. Now I’m kind of well maybe ‘B’ isn’t the best way to describe your progress this term. This is why I like having these discussions, so I can hear what
you have to say and look at some of your work again and maybe I’m wrong.

RICKY: Okay.

TEACHER: Right?

RICKY: Yup.

However, despite my invitation for him to use resistant power, Ricky seems to invite me to determine his grade and reluctant to take up my invitation to reassess his grade with his minimal responses.

Bobby uses power to resist and question until determination of a grade is deferred (but left entirely in the teacher’s hands):

BOBBY: So, if I get a good mark on my test it will ...

TEACHER: So that test will probably be the determining factor. And you’ve said to me that you think your work is ‘good’ to ‘very good’ so we’re in the right ballpark. We’re thinking the same way. So we’ll see how you do on that and we’ll let that kinda be the deciding factor.

BOBBY: And um that sheet that I didn’t get because I wasn’t here?

TEACHER: Yeah, I’m going to get you one.

BOBBY: Does that have a mark as well?

TEACHER: It goes in here and goes in this column here for, um, working together in groups. Okay, because that is what it’s evaluating. So, we’ll get a couple more pieces of information for this puzzle and we’ll get fresh grades in there so there will actually be 11 scores. Okay, so that’s what we’ll work on.

In Bobby’s case, this deferment is due to his being absent for a few days at the end of term. He needs to finish the assessments from the term before a grade can be determined. His use of a conditional ‘if’ with regards to his missing test indicates that he feels that the result of that assessment is up to the teacher. His use of invitational power subjectifies him and allows me to use power to determine his grade, yet he uses resistant power to ask for the materials he’s missing.

Immediately after I give my C+ evaluation, Jane uses resistant power to presents new evidence: “Oh, and also, my European map, um’hmm, I realized that you had said
to me that it was incomplete, and I’ve finished it.” I reply with a speech activity that I am hard pressed to classify. I invite her to “leave [her] collection with me and I’ll look it over again.” She replies with “alright” and I indicate “that [my looking over her work again] will probably change a couple of these low ones, right?” Jane agrees with “alright”.

I invite this use of power but then resist it all in the space of a single sentence when I say that I will look at it again. When I say that I will look at it again, I am reserving the evaluation of the work to myself and acknowledge that I am, as teacher, the final arbiter of the evaluation. I able to use significantly more power within the grading scenario than is the student even though I am attempting to invite them in. However, this can be looked at another way. By allowing the student’s late work into the discussion, I am inviting the student to use power to influence the determination of the grade. I am using invitational and resistant power in the same breath and even with the same words.

Jane’s agreement with the situation at the end of this discourse signals her use of invitational power that further subjectifies her. Jane’s conference concludes with my use of resistant/coercive power when I say, “You said yourself that you are kind of in that area [in terms of the letter grade] so I think we are in agreement …,” about the grade and then laying out how the evaluation will be presented to parents on the report card insert. My use of resistant and coercive power reinforces Jane’s subjectification as we are not actually in agreement, but I want to frame the evaluation as if we are so that it seems as if we have collaborated on the grade.

Max’s Phase E can hardly be called a negotiation. He is happy with my evaluation and accepts that there are areas that can be targeted for improvement. What is interesting is the discussion of assessment and evaluation methodology that ensues following this. I feel this is worth examining in some detail as the physics of power use is perhaps the most diverse in Max’s case. There seems to be some genuine parrhesia here as Max speaks his truth and I consider his perspective. There isn’t any one use by any one party that dominates this phase, but we both vary our power use throughout, although, in terms of volume of words uttered, my use of resistant power could be said to dominate. This exchange begins with neutral power use on my part as I give my rationale for using a letter grade scale rather than the more common 4-point mastery scale:
TEACHER: ... I know a lot of teachers use the four-point scale but since I have to come up with a letter grade, I might as well use letter grades right off the bat. That way I don’t have to worry about converting anything.

MAX: Yeah.

TEACHER: So people don’t ask me what is an A? Is it three, three and a half, four? An A is an A is an A right?

MAX: Yeah, it’s just the A, the B, the C the C+

TEACHER: You think about it. We’ve got the four-point system, that you’ve got to turn into a letter grade. Other teachers use a more numerical system that has percentage or something like that.

Here Max uses invitational power by agreeing with me, but when I mention percentages, he responds with resistant power use:

MAX: Myself, I like percentages

TEACHER: For some things, yes

MAX: Yeah

TEACHER: Other things

MAX: I like percentage

TEACHER: Well that’s because you’ve got a number to deal with, right?

MAX: Yeah

TEACHER: So, we’re looking at the number of questions you’ve answered correctly, and you know the more questions you’re able to answer correctly, the higher your achievement is.

MAX: Yes

When he twice states that he ‘likes percentages’, he is clearly using resistant power. I respond by resisting this power use in my first two speech activates, but in my third and fourth I revert to inviting Max’s power use and he responds by shifting his power use from resistant to neutral. However, this doesn’t last as I begin the next exchange with invitational use of power, “So that does make sense”, but switch to resistant in order to coerce Max’s agreement with my dislike of percentages:
TEACHER: So that does make sense. But for a piece of writing, I don’t need one hundred points to decide where you’re at because, seriously, am I going to use the bottom fifty? Not likely.

MAX: Yeah

TEACHER: No, unless it’s really, really bad. So, I’ve already cut my scale in half. And then I can just kind of group them, so I don’t need to use numbers for most of the work that I do.

The final exchange begins when I switch to neutral and invitational power use to bring the conference to a close:

TEACHER: ... Alright. So, if you’re happy with that [the grade], I’m happy with that. I can give you a tick here and a tick there and uh, unless you want to share something else, we’re done.

MAX: Alright, thank you (Teacher).

Max responds with neutral and invitational power use as he agrees with the evaluation and thanks me.

In conclusion, the micro physics of power use in the first term grading conferences isn’t as diverse as I had hoped. I, as teacher, use power far more often than the students do. My use of power dominates all phases save the first. I revert to resistant or coercive power use on occasions when my perspectives and conceptions are challenged. This is disheartening to say the least as by opening up the grading process to students I hoped some elements of ‘Fearless Speech’ or parrhesia might be taken up by the students. Although Foucault contends that the Ancient Greek concept of Socratic parrhesia can “no longer occur in our modern epistemological framework”(2001, p. 14), I believe, in the context of the grading conference, it does. When these speech activities are examined in light of the definition given by Foucault that parrhesia consists of frankness, truth, danger, criticism, and duty, (2001, pp. 11–20) it becomes clear that Bobby and Max meet, to a significant extent, Foucault’s parrhesia criteria, while those of Jane and Ricky less so.

Second Term Grading Conferences

The second round of grading conferences took place in February, about 18 weeks into the school year. The second term grading conferences followed the focus
group session where Sam suggested that the grading conference protocol be altered so that the student made a presentation of the grade they felt they deserved followed by evidence and explanation as to why that grade best described their learning. In this phase the students were asked to present evidence of their achievement in reading, writing and social studies content knowledge. This is essentially a combination of Phases A and B from the first term protocol and, for the sake of consistency, I have used that nomenclature here. The remaining phases of the grading conference are the same as those in the first term conferences.

Perhaps what is the most notable about the second round of grading conferences is the balanced use of power between teacher and student. Power use is fairly evenly split in four of the five cases. In two cases the teacher uses power slightly more than the student while in another two the situation is reversed. Bobby’s case stands out in this phase as the student uses power in nearly 2/3 of the speech activities.

**Phases A & B**

![Figure 9. Overall Power Use Distribution, Second Term Conference: Phases A&B](image-url)
These phases are the longest in the second term conferences consisting of, on average, 53 speech activities. In these combined phases, SN power use dominates the four typical cases, and this is usually followed by a balanced mixture of TN and TI power use. Bobby is the exception in that SI and SN power use dominate followed by TN, a little TI and very little SR.

This phase of Bobby’s second term conference is worth examining in some detail as our discourse reveals not only patterns of power use, but also illustrates the tension between Bobby’s more quantitative approach to understanding his learning and my attempts to introduce him to more reflexive and qualitative approaches. Bobby again relies on teacher generated grades and scores for his evidence of achievement. At the end of his self-evaluation presentation he attempts to average the teacher produced scores when he says:

“So, I added everything up from here and if I took, like, all the higher marks that I thought I would get, like, a B+ or an A- and if I took all the lower marks I would get a B since I got, I think anyway, a majority of B’s, a few A’s and a few C+’s, but the majority are B’s”

This is similar to his first term conferences and it can be said that Bobby remains quite fixed in his mindset and understanding of his learning. Later in this phase I ask Bobby, “Do you have any more later examples that show you’ve improved in that
[writing] area? Maybe in your most recent stuff?” as an attempt to have him present student generated qualitative evidence of growth. He is unable to do this and again invites me to use power by replying, “I don’t know what you gave me [emphasis added] for this. You said it was very general and I missed one of the questions.” In this speech act he is focused on my evaluation and invites me to use power to evaluate his learning rather than take the feedback given, reflect and determine his own achievement. This indicates that this form of assessment and evaluation has limits and is less likely to work well with students who have quite literal and fixed mindsets without significant coaching.

Jane’s second term phase A&B has the second largest differential between teacher and student use of power as she is the one using power in nearly 3/5 of the speech activities in these phases. It is also remarkable as this phase is only about half as long in terms of speech activities as compared to the others. She is also the only participant to not use any resistant power in these phases and there is a close balance between TI and SI power use with TN use being the weakest.

Jane begins with a strangely mixed opening response to my initial prompt:

Okay, um, well part of me sort of feels like some of my work is worthy of an “A” but there’s been times where I’ve been like: “Yeah, maybe I should get a “B”. Like with the report. I know you said that the wording I used was very good but our format, not doing the reason and evidence as it was written down, so that was a part where at first I thought it was an A, but then I thought it was a B, so I’m kind of between an A and a B but I feel like asking for an A is really pushing ...

In this speech activity, Jane begins strongly but then hesitates and withdraws her initial claim that she ought to get an A. Her reasoning shows that she relies on teacher feedback and assessment in order to arrive at her determination and is reflecting on how well her work meets teacher set expectations. This shows that she is using neutral power while also inviting the teacher’s use of power into her self-assessment.

Jane’s last phrase in this speech activity shows her reluctance to advocate for her initial claim and also shows her own reflexive nature and how she is struggling with the task of self-assessment. On the recording it is clear from her tone of voice that she would like to claim the A but feels like it might just be too grasping. In fact, my own assessment, as we will see in Phase D, is an A.
I respond to her hesitation by reassuring her that she can claim any letter grade she would like to so long as there is evidence to support the claim. This reassurance seems to allow Jane to present evidence of her learning with confidence. She clarifies with me what evidence we are considering this term and then presents several examples and discusses them in relation to her earlier work so that evidence of progress is given. She discusses her writing in technical terms and points out the area where her language use has improved.

She uses power neutrally and confidently through much of the exchange and on at least two occasions frames the discussion and leads me, as her teacher, through her understanding of her strengths and areas of growth. She presents meta-cognitive understanding and shows a good deal of reflexive thinking. Jane’s case exemplifies what bringing student voice adds to the understanding of a student’s learning and progress when that student is thoughtful and given the tools to assess themselves.

Max’s case appears typical on the surface with the majority of his speech activities coded as neutral power use. However, he has the lowest SI power use of all five cases and the highest number of resistant speech activities. Max’s case is also the only case where I openly resist student power use.

Max begins strongly, using what might be considered a confrontational tone, in claiming he is demonstrating A level achievement when he says, “… I deserve an A because of how hard I’ve worked in class ….” However, in British Columbia, the effort a student makes is reported in a separate work habits score and not through the letter grade. I use power in a resistant way when I interrupt him, reinforce this difference, and remind him of the conference focus.

The next several moments of the conference are strained as he and I negotiate our roles. Max opts to reframe the note-taking evidence he was using for effort as evidence for social studies. Throughout the exchange about the note-taking, I interrupt him, put words in his mouth, and prompt him. The following exchange shows this in practice as we discuss his note-taking as evidence for reading:

TEACHER: So, your reading. When you are reading the things you’re taking notes from, your notes are going to be evidence of your ability to get information from the book. So, the
evidence of your reading. So, you would say this is “very good” … “excellent” note-taking?

MAX: I’d say it’s very good. Kind of a B/B+ range.

TEACHER: You’re getting a lot of good information out of it. And you’re keeping track of all sorts of good things.

MAX: ISBNs, dates …

TEACHER: Your taking notes is very good. Okay, so that takes care of some reading from non-fiction.

I use power more than Max does, and I speak more than he does. My speech activities use power neutrally or invitational in content and tone, while Max use only neutral power in his limited speech activities throughout this exchange. However, what I am saying is less important than my not allowing him to speak. I am using power in a resistant way by enforcing my agenda and making my own meaning from the limited things he says rather than inviting him to use power to express more fully what the evidence he selected shows.

I become more invitational in my power use in the second part of his presentation as we move on to discuss writing. Max suggests that he doesn’t have much evidence of his writing, but he is under the impression that only longer pieces ought to be considered. I invite him to consider various other pieces and he remembers that there were some questions we did that he can use for evidence, but they are in another duo-tang and he goes off to fetch it. When he returns, he brings yet another piece of evidence from a different assignment. He introduces it by saying, “I think that this one of my better pieces of writing just because of the language I use. Better sentence structure than normal.” I ask him to read out a section. He does, and I point out how the example shows the traits of writing we were working on.

The conference becomes more comfortable and collaborative as Max moves on to discuss his content knowledge in Social Studies. In this final portion of Phase A&B, Max dominates the speech activities. He speaks again with confidence about is learning in this subject area and presents evidence that supports his self-assessment.

He responds in an interesting way to my prompt for any additional information he would like to share. He chooses to bring up an assignment where he was not as successful as he might have been: "I think we did pretty well on our Viking project. The
report I found was hard to write. I've never done a report [as opposed to an argumentative essay] before and ... we should have spaced out our paragraphs in our evidence section.” I ask him if he learned from the experience. He replies, “Yes, I think that was a good learning experience. Hopefully, if we do a report again, it will be better.” He recognizes this assignment as his first attempt at a new writing form and reflects on what he needs to improve next time.

In Max’s case, a power struggle was avoided, but the potential was certainly present. After an initial false start, the momentum shifted, and latter portions of this phase were much more collaborative than the earlier. The teacher is challenged in this case to speak less and listen more. The student is challenged to understand what the letter grade represents and what evidence best demonstrates their achievement relative to learning outcomes or standards. Both of these are non-traditional roles and require some negotiation between the parties in terms of power use. With practice and as the teacher-student relationship matures through the school year, these roles can become easier to assume.

Phases A&B in the second term conferences are much more cohesive than they were in the first round. The self-evaluation purpose of these phases is much clearer, and the students articulate their own understanding of their learning more directly and in a form where their own understanding is accessible. It is apparent the students know what is expected of them and they are better prepared to share and justify their own evaluations.

Instances of students using resistant power are very much lower or non-existent. I feel this is due to several factors, but the most salient is that this is the second time through the process, and, although the process has been altered, the process has also been demystified. Students have the confidence that comes of having done this sort of thing before. Another significant factor is that students have taken some ownership of the process. Sam suggested the protocol be changed, and I made this clear to the students when I introduced the new protocol to them as they prepared for the second term conferences. Additionally, the students have a more narrowly defined task in these phases that employs analytical and language use skills that were taught and practiced in the second term. All in all, students were better prepared for the second term
conferences and this shows in the reduction of resistant uses of power in these initial phases the second time around.

**Phase C**

Unfortunately, the remainder of Ricky’s conference was not captured due to a technical fault. However, we still have four cases we can examine: Bobby, Jane, Max, and Sam.

As expected, teacher use of power dominates this phase with 50 to 74% of the power use being by the teacher. In only one case, that of Sam, is teacher power use completely neutral. With Max and Bobby, I use power neutrally and invitationally with neutral power use balanced or slightly dominant. I use the most power with Jane (74%) and 7% of that power use is resistant. This is the only case of teacher resistant (TR) power use in this phase.

Students use power invitationally the majority of the time in this phase (33-13%). Bobby’s is the only case where a student uses power neutrally. In Jane’s and Sam’s cases, they use power in a resistant way for a significant portion of this phase.

![Overall Power Use Distribution, Second Term Conference: Phase C](image_url)

**Figure 11.** Overall Power Use Distribution, Second Term Conference: Phase C
The sharing of teacher assessment data is a relatively short phase consisting, on average, of 11 speech activities. It is interesting that Jane and Sam use resistant power while Max and Bobby do not. Jane and Sam use resistant power to clarify the data presented by the teacher. In Jane’s case she questions my use of resistant power when I point out that she hadn’t done a particular assessment. Sam simply wonders why there are blank spaces in my assessment data and I assure him that it is only because we didn’t gather any data in that area. In both cases the students are satisfied with the explanations they receive. Bobby’s unquestioning acceptance of the teacher presented assessment data is not surprising as we have seen he is usually deferential towards the teacher’s use of power, but in Max’s case this is unusual. Max simply accepts what I present to him in this phase.

It seems as if the students are waiting for me to announce the grade I think they should receive. Even though we reversed the order for the students when presenting their grades so that they present the grade first and support it with evidence in the second term, I opt to present my assessment data first and then my grade as a conclusion. I do this to lead up to what may be an emotional moment and to ensure that I have presented my assessment data before the start of the negotiation phase.
Phase D

This phase of the conference, along with the phase that precedes it, serve as preliminary phases to the negotiation phase that concludes the conference. This is the shortest phase and consists, on average, of two speech activities. Bobby and Jane’s phases consist simply of my announcing my letter grade and then we immediately begin the negotiation phase.

I had initially set down a B for Sam, but Sam presents an interesting case here as I find myself negotiating with myself and revising my evaluation even as I present it to him. Here is the phase in full:

TEACHER: So, when I count up the letters, I go ... eight A’s ... five, so you have more A’s than anything else so, I guess I’ve got to change that [B to an A].

SAM: Oh, thank you. Okay.

I find myself reacting to his resistant use of power in phase C and also reconsidering my evaluation as I review my own data. What is not evident from the transcript is the physics of power at play in the physical and non-verbal realm. From my recollection as I listen to the recordings, at this moment I feel tension between the student and myself and a desire not to disappoint the student. In my own analysis prior to the conference, I determined that the appropriate letter grade for Sam was a B. In light of the evidence he presented as well as my revisiting of my own data, I felt compelled to raise his letter grade. I am not sure I would have felt that same compulsion had I not been sitting with the student.

In Max’s case I also determined that his letter grade was a B. In fact, Max is bright enough to figure this out from my data before I announce it, “More B’s than A’s.” His tone on the recording indicates disappointment in this result. I agree with this determination in a neutral way and then begin the negotiation phase myself by inviting student use of power.
As we can see from the above graphs, power use in this phase is case dependent, however the dominate aggregate power use is TN followed by SI.
Let us take the most extreme case, that of Sam, where he only invites teacher use of power and doesn’t use any other form of power. I use neutral power only in this negotiation phase. I have to use the term negation loosely in this case because, as pointed out above, I negotiated with myself in phase D to change my evaluation of Sam’s achievement from a B to an A. In this short phase E, Sam agrees and thanks me on three occasions. I explain to Sam (and myself) my rationale for altering my determination of his grade: “So, I was looking at this score here and I went: ‘The most recent work is an A so why should his previous work take him down when his most recent work is really good?’ So it doesn’t make sense [to give him a B].” So, in this phase of Sam’s conference there really isn’t any negotiation as there is nothing to negotiate as Sam claims that he ought to have a “strong B or maybe a light A” in phase A&B. Sam and I are in agreement and I’ve stated that I think his grade should be an A, so there is nothing for Sam to gain and everything for him to lose in disputing this assessment.

Bobby’s phase E is similar to Sam’s as we both arrive at the same determination of a B. In this case I didn’t have to rationalize any alteration to my determination and since it agreed with the student’s, then there was not any negotiation. This was the easiest of the four in this phase as Bobby invites me to use power and, as we have seen in previous phases, he is least likely to use resistant power.

Jane’s phase E is the most balanced of the four. The power use graph shows the give and take of this phase well. Jane begins the negotiation by analyzing my assessment data containing more A’s than B’s for herself, “Well, if I had more A’s than B’s, I think I would probably be leaning toward an A. If it was the other way around, I would be leaning toward a B.” In her case we are also in agreement and there is not, therefore, any actual negotiation. She is a little surprised with this evaluation as she hesitated to claim an A for herself in Phases A&B and I had to encourage her to advocate for the grade she truly felt communicates her achievement. I conclude the conference by complimenting her on her presentation skills.

So far, we have seen negotiation phases where the student and the teacher are in agreement. In Sam’s case I talked myself into a higher grade before Sam had a chance to resist and enter into a negotiation. Max’s Phase E is similar in that I find
myself doubting my own assessment in this phase of the conference and eventually agree to an A grade instead of the B grade I had previously determined.

What is happening with Max is that in Phase C I examined my assessment data in light of the evidence Max presented and expressed doubt about the accuracy of the assessment when the determination is made quantitatively: “I’m not sure. If we’re doing this just mathematically, then we’ve got …. More B’s than A’s.” I continue into Phase E with:

“What you’ve shown me has, kinda, made me think more about this. It’s just doing the, kinda, data analysis this way produces one result, but when you look at the work that you’ve shown me, it shows that you are working perhaps at a higher level than this. In general, I’ve been finding that your most recent work have (sic) been of very good quality and getting into the outstanding territory. … Um, I can see in your writing and in your discussion and the way you operate in the classroom that you’re really thinking about what’s going on. That, I think we can use as evidence as well. Not just what you’ve turned in to me. It’s all evidence. I would be quite happy with actually changing this (the B in the marks book to an A) because I think that that is a much better descriptor of what, of how you are working at this moment, right? At the end of this term.

Much like Sam, Max says little as I rationalize my altering of his grade based on the evidence he has presented. He simply agrees and invites me to use power as I talk myself into changing my assessment.

The physics of power at play in this case are interesting because the teacher’s traditional role of the teacher as single assessor is challenged when confronted with evidence presented by the student that causes them to reconsider their evaluation. In the other cases this didn’t take place to the extent it does with Max. We can see through the other interactions with Max that he is logical and confident. He is able to enter the parrhesiastic game and speak his truth to an authority figure to the greatest extent of the five participants in this study. Of course, the ultimate decision still rest with the teacher, but having decided to arrive at a determination of the letter grade before the student leaves the conference, this decision must be made with the student present.

Having the student present and under the time pressure of having to make these decisions in the ‘heat of the moment’ so to speak, allows the student to use power to influence the teacher’s decision-making process. The teacher is aware of the student’s
presence and of the relationship that exists between them. The teacher must balance multiple factors including the fact that this meeting is not private but held in the open classroom while other students are working on independent work, but still within earshot. There is pressure to avoid confrontation and to live up to promises to take the student’s self-assessment data into consideration. All of these factors and pressures influence the teacher’s professional judgement and ability to reflect on the evidence presented by the student.

In Max’s case, he was able to influence me to change his grade when, upon reflection both immediately following the conference and during the coding of the interview data, I didn’t want to. Was the change to his grade accurate? In hindsight I think so. Plus/minus grades are not used for the B or A range in British Columbia, but this is one case where I think they would be useful so that a degree of letter grade might be reported.
Discussion

This study set out to investigate two questions:

- What are the micro-physics of power between student and teacher when collaborating in determining student term letter grades?
- To what extent are students able to become parrhesiastes vis à vis the teacher through this collaboration?

While the micro-physics of power at play in the collaborative grading conferences are complex and case dependent, it is apparent that, when taken together, the teacher is the dominant user of power in this process. In the majority of the phases the teacher uses power more than the students. Moreover, teacher power use has a deeper impact on the outcome of the process than student power use.

While the grading process used during the study period does invite student power use and elicits student interpretations and perspectives, the teacher retains the ability to use power in an arbitrary fashion to influence the determination of the student’s grade. I believe I restrained this use of power in my interactions with the study participants, however, in some cases I did use power to resist the students’ own understanding of their achievement while privileging my voice over theirs.

This result is disappointing as I conceived this collaborative process as an effort to disrupt teacher dominated power relationships and dynamics inherent in a more traditional grading process. Nevertheless, some students were able to use power and influence the outcome of the conferences.

This student power use exploits the teacher/student relationship in verbal and non-verbal ways to influence the teacher’s judgement and evaluation. This was especially true of Max and, to a lesser extent, Sam. This demonstrates that this process allows for some power use by students, but only that the more confident students are able to use power to the extent that their self-assessment is genuinely considered by the teacher.

The ancient Greek concept of parrhesia was another focus of this study. Parrhesia, as outlined by Foucault, involves speaking truths to power at some risk to the speaker. The ability of a student to enter into the parrhesiastic game is related to the
micro-physics of power at play in each student's case. In the five cases studied, there is a spectrum of ability to enter the parrhesiastic game from Ricky and Jane through Bobby to Sam and Max. It was challenging for most students to break with traditional teacher/student roles and speak their truth to my power even when invited and encouraged to do so.

This was especially true in the first term conferences, yet by the second term students were able to enter more fully into the parrhesiastic game. I can only speculate as to the causes of this increased parrhesiastic ability, but it may have been due to the alteration of the conference protocol in the second term, enhanced confidence and comfort granted by the growth in the teacher/student relationship over the second term, and/or the focus group conversations where the students were encouraged to share their ideas and knowledge.

Admittedly there are several limitations to this study.

The design of the study – self-study coupled with case study – limits the data collection and analysis to a single hermeneutical perspective by its very nature. As much as I have striven to be objective, clearly, biases exist in my data analysis and subsequent interpretation. Yet a portion of this bias was mitigated by the temporal distance between the data collection period and the iterations of the analysis. Over the nearly four-year interval between data collection and final analysis, I disengaged from the teacher/student relationship to consider the data with decreased attachment, less confirmation bias and a new perspective.

The focus group can be considered a limitation on the study as it did not provide any direct data for the discussion of the micro-physics of power but did allow students another opportunity to speak and be heard by an authority figure. The focus group also prompted the change to the protocol for the second term conferences making the two conferences not as comparable as they would have been had the protocols remained the same.

That being said, the results of this study remain encouraging. I found that a properly trained student can provide valuable self-assessment data to the teacher for consideration when determining a student's term grade despite the power use imbalance. This is encouraging as this self-evaluation data captures a more nuanced
view of the learner’s process and their academic achievement than teacher collected data alone.

However, it also shows that when grades or scores are given by the teacher on assessment tasks, students default to that assessment and privilege the teacher’s assessment over their own. The students look to the teacher as the expert in the assessment and evaluation of academic achievement and need encouragement to trust their own self-knowledge. Teachers must offer this encouragement and have the confidence and open-mindedness to allow student self-reported assessment data into their evaluation. Teachers can encourage this by giving less quantitative feedback and more qualitative and descriptive feedback. Teachers and students can learn from each other given the opportunity.

The study also shows that students and teachers are able to operate as parrahesiastes in the communication of this assessment information to each other. This is very encouraging. Should teachers open up the discussion of assessment and evaluation to allow student participation, both parties benefit, and the assessment and evaluation of student academic achievement becomes richer, more nuanced, and gains resolution.

What is cautionary about the results of this study are that teachers remain dominant in the use of power in the teacher/student relationship. When this dominant position is threatened, teachers can use power to resist and disrupt student uses of power and, despite the best of intentions, can bully students into accepting their version of events and/or their evaluation. On the other hand, some students are proficient parrahesiastes and manage to resist this teacher domination and have their understanding of their academic achievement gain equal or greater standing alongside that of their teacher.

While it remains teacher work to evaluate student achievement and communicate this to stakeholders, opening up the discourse to student voice and student understanding of their academic achievement serves only to enrich the data available to the teacher, compel teachers to articulate their assessment practice and enhance transparency of the grading process for the benefit of all parties.
This study was conducted in the 2013-2014 school year. Over the intervening five years I have changed schools and levels so that I now teach English Language Arts at a large secondary school in both the International Baccalaureate Programme and the BC Dogwood Graduation Program from grade 9 through grade 12. We operate with two semesters of two terms each.

While I remain an enthusiastic disrupter of traditional grading practice, I have felt institutional pressure from stakeholders to revert to traditional practice in many ways. I have had to use resistant power against these institutional pressures and find allies who are interested in my work. I believe involving students in the assessment and evaluation process is intrinsically valuable. Conferences ought to be a cornerstone of this involvement. I have discovered through this study and the research of others that descriptive feedback and conferencing with students throughout the learning process are better for learning than giving each assessment task a grade or score alone.

I have adapted the grading practice used during the study period to the secondary school model and iteration continues. I have moved towards a standards-based and feedback focused grading system where I involve students in self-assessment and peer-review. The total number of standards has been reduced to three: to what extent does the student know and understand the course content and concepts; to what extent they are able to analyze, synthesize and evaluate the content; and to what extent they are able to communicate. I involve myself in the later drafts of work and conference with students around their progress and achievement throughout the semester. I give descriptive feedback that, I hope, moves the student toward greater understanding and ability. Most of my assessment tasks are low stake and formative. I continue to have students maintain a growth portfolio. Evaluation draws on evidence from the later stages of the learning cycle.

I have found it challenging to find time for the formal grading conferences. This is especially true of the IB classes I teach. The pressure to cover content is profound in the IB as these classes have high stakes assessments that are externally determined. I find it challenging to devote six or more class periods a semester to formal grading conferences. In the Dogwood classes this is easier as nearly the entire assessment and
evaluation program is teacher determined. This will continue to alter as the grade 12 provincial exam is phased out. As of writing, the replacement assessment has yet to be determined. I am hopeful that assessment and evaluation of student coursework will be placed into the teacher’s hands and that the external examination of student literacy will be decoupled from curriculum.

I am hopeful that with the implementation of the revised BC curriculum and the phasing out of provincial examinations there is scope for progressive assessment and evaluation practices to become the norm. I know that what I have learned through conducting this study will help to bring some of these to my own classroom and I hope that those reading this study will find something to take away and use in their own work.
References


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Davies, A. (2007b). *Making classroom assessment work*. Courtenay, B.C: Connections Pub. Retrieved from http://sfu.summon.serialssolutions.com/link/0/eLvHCXMoY2BQSDyZzNTdMNQfWTEI5uZmycBGM-gUKBOTZE0jNNM0E5TFsUluZsog4ya4izhy6wexYPHb6lTzlFHTJuDKy2xRhYgF3iVL4uHt1KMTWnL1tYatybeB61IBADMczz1


# Appendix A.

## Humanities Learning Outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SS 1</th>
<th>Develop an awareness of human cultures, societies, and civilizations from 500CE – 1600CE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SS 2</td>
<td>Describe and analyze the influence of politics and law on the development of human cultures, societies, and civilizations from 500CE – 1600CE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SS 3</td>
<td>Describe and analyze the impact of economic forces on human cultures, societies and civilizations from 500CE – 1600CE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SS 4</td>
<td>Describe and analyze the role of science and technology in changing human cultures, societies and civilizations from 500CE – 1600CE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SS 5</td>
<td>Describe and analyze the interaction between the natural environment and human cultures, societies, and civilizations from 500CE – 1600CE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELA 1</td>
<td>Interact with others to create ideas and texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELA 2</td>
<td>Use metacognitive strategies to reflect on and assess speaking &amp; listening, writing &amp; reading and representing &amp; viewing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELA 3</td>
<td>Create personal oral and written communications and representations with clearly developed ideas that connect experiences, ideas, opinions, and feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELA 4</td>
<td>Speak, write and represent information, persuasive, narrative, poetic and descriptive texts to communicate ideas and information with a clear purpose and form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELA 5</td>
<td>Speak, write, and represent to interpret, analyze, and synthesize ideas and information, attending to bias and perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELA 6</td>
<td>Select and apply strategies to develop, organize, revise, and publish written, visual and oral communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELA 7</td>
<td>Use features, structures and conventions of language to enhance meaning and artistry in written and spoken communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELA 8</td>
<td>Select and read a variety of texts for enjoyment and to increase fluency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELA 9</td>
<td>Use evidence to explain and support responses, analyses, and interpretations of texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELA 10</td>
<td>Listen, read and view literary, information, and visual texts to comprehend, analyze, and synthesize ideas, attending to bias and perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELA 11</td>
<td>Select and apply strategies to construct, monitor, extend, and confirm meaning before, during and after reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELA 12</td>
<td>Use features, structures, and patterns of language to make meaning from what is heard, read, and viewed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

Letter Grade Descriptions

A  The student demonstrates excellent or outstanding performance in relation to expected learning outcomes for the course or subject and grade.

B  The student demonstrates very good performance in relation to expected learning outcomes for the course or subject and grade.

C+ The student demonstrates good performance in relation to expected learning outcomes for the course or subject and grade.

C  The student demonstrates satisfactory performance in relation to expected learning outcomes for the course or subject and grade.

C- The student demonstrates minimally acceptable performance in relation to expected learning outcomes for the course or subject and grade.

I  (In Progress or Incomplete) The student, for a variety of reasons, is not demonstrating minimally acceptable performance in relation to the expected learning outcomes.

F  (Failing) The student has not demonstrated, or is not demonstrating, the minimally acceptable performance in relation to expected learning outcomes for the course or subject and grade. The letter grade “F” may only be assigned if an “I” (In Progress) letter grade has previously been assigned for that course or subject and grade.
Appendix C

Max’s Term One Reflection Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Humanities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Name:</strong> [redacted]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each example (evidence) you discuss has an important part to play in explaining your learning. Be sure to carefully think about your choices.

Students must show the following examples of their learning:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I am most proud of...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My European Map Project because I think I got a good score. I got + check marks and a 3 and a 25.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I am showing progress in...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language skills because on my first test I got 21 and on my second test I got 23.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A challenge for me is/was...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language skills because it isn’t my best subject.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A goal for me is...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To improve my writing skills because I want to get better at writing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Humanities

Students must show the following examples of their learning

I have improved my reading by...
Reading Game of Thrones, which it book meant for adults. (I've read the whole series but I re-read some of the books)

I have improved my writing of non-fiction texts by...
Writing notes on Ancient Rome

I have improved my writing of responses to texts by...
Writing more responses to text

I am developing my awareness of past cultures, societies and civilizations by...
Studying Ancient Rome
Appendix D

Max’s Term One Gradebook Page

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Gradebook Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Source: Minutes (2000)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>