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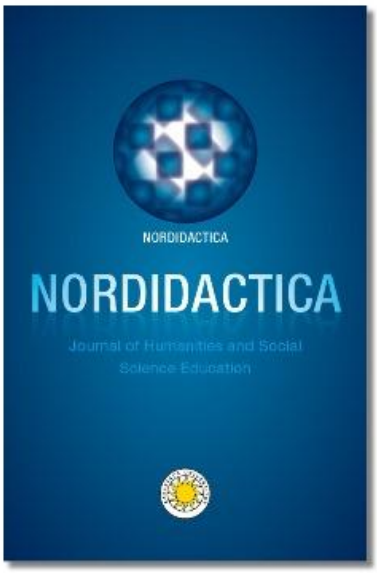

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Grading in upper secondary civics in Sweden

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Abstract: This study explores grading practices among Swedish upper secondary civics teachers through interviews with thirteen educators. It examines how teachers document student performance, determine grades, and weight different types of assignments. The findings show that teachers primarily use a continuous grading model based on secondary documentation such as digital grade rubrics, occasionally complemented by holistic and intuitive approaches. In grading, time, content, criteria, and size are considered when weighting different assignments. While written assignments dominate, oral performance is under-represented, raising concerns about validity and fairness. Despite civics being an open subject, a shared canon, especially in politics and economics, shapes assessment. The study highlights the need for transparency and consistency in grading to support equitable educational outcomes.

KEYWORDS**:** ASSESSMENT, CIVICS, GRADING, SOCIAL STUDIES, VALIDITY

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Introduction

This article investigates the grading practices of thirteen civics teachers in Swedish upper secondary schools. Grades hold significant value for both students and society, serving as a primary criterion for selection in educational admissions and, in some cases, employment. Consequently, grades play a crucial role in shaping students' future opportunities. In Sweden, admission to higher education is predominantly determined by teacher-assigned grades, a practice that is relatively uncommon in an international context (Lundahl, Hultén, & Tveit, 2017). Thus, the way teachers assign grades has direct implications for students. Also, what content and skills teachers assess will influence students' perceptions of what is important to learn and students' learning strategies (Brookhart & Durkin, 2003; Olovsson, 2015; Löfgren, Löfgren & Lindberg, 2019).

The nature of the subject also seems to affect teachers' grading practices (McMillan, 2001; Biberman-Shalev *et al.*, 2011; Prøitz, 2013). However, knowledge about the subject's impact on grading is limited, not least in civics (Torrez & Claunch-Lebsack, 2014; Barton & Avery, 2016). Civics is considered to be an open and flexible subject (Öberg & Bäckström, 2021), which enables greater agency in teachers' assessment work (Jansson, 2023). This article explores grading in civics in upper secondary school, a subject that is included in all upper secondary programmes in Sweden. As teachers' assessment practices are shaped in a social and cultural context (Allal, 2013; Klenowski, 2013), it may be of particular interest to study grading practices among Swedish upper secondary school teachers in civics.

Given that grades function as a selection mechanism, the issue of equitable and fair assessment becomes particularly salient (Jönsson, 2024). Swedish teachers enjoy considerable autonomy in designing their assessments, making it essential to understand their grading practices in order to engage in more informed discussions about fairness and equality in assessment. For grades to be equivalent, they must be grounded in relevant and appropriate evidence, thereby highlighting the importance of validity. Validity pertains to the extent to which teachers' assessments are aligned with their intended purpose (Messick, 1989; Kane, 2016; Jönsson, 2024). Teachers must therefore rely on appropriate evidence and documentation to ensure that the grades they assign are both fair and justified.

Both in Sweden and internationally, there has been a growing political and educational interest in assessment practices (Pettersson & Wester, 2020). International assessments such as PISA and TIMSS have drawn attention to educational outcomes and the performance of national education systems. In Sweden, this has led to a series of reforms and targeted investments in the school system. Several of these reforms have focused on assessment, notably the 2011 grading reform, which has since undergone revision and remains under review as of 2025 (SOU 2025:18). A key objective of these reforms is to enhance the consistency of teachers' assessments and grading practices, as research and official reports (Korp, 2006; Skolverket, 2020; Skolinspektionen, 2021) have identified disparities in grading across schools and among teachers. These inconsistencies may stem from the inclusion of non-academic factors such as effort and engage-

ment, or from the use of inappropriate evidence in grading decisions (McMillan, 2001; Brookhart *et al.*, 2016).

By shedding light on teachers' grading practices, this study contributes to the development of more consistent and equitable grading, thereby promoting greater fairness in educational outcomes. It is evident that grading constitutes a vital aspect of the teaching profession, with significant implications for individuals' life trajectories. Nevertheless, there remains a relative paucity of research on how teachers actually grade, specifically the types of documentation they use and how they weight different evidence of student performance. Drawing on interviews with civics teachers, this article offers a nuanced account of grading practices, thereby illuminating a core dimension of teachers' professional responsibilities.

Purpose

The aim is to explore Swedish upper secondary civics teachers' grading practices. The research questions are: what kind of documentation do teachers use when grading? How do teachers determine grades, including how they weight students' various performances when grading? And finally, how does the nature of the subject influence the grading process?

Civics in Swedish upper secondary school

This study explores grading in civics in Swedish upper secondary school. Therefore, it is essential to outline the educational system in general and specifically the subject of civics in Sweden.

Following compulsory education, most Swedish students transition to upper secondary school ("gymnasium"), where they enrol in either vocational or higher education preparatory programmes. These programmes are structured around subject-specific courses (Skolverket, 2011). Each course syllabus comprises three components: the subject's aim, core content (encompassing both factual knowledge and skills), and knowledge requirements for grading. Certain courses are compulsory across all programmes, including the introductory civics course (Skolverket, 2011). Students in preparatory programmes undertake Civics 1b, a more comprehensive course, while those in vocational tracks study the shorter Civics 1a1. This article focuses on these two courses, both of which encompass a wide range of content, including democratic systems on different levels, human rights, the labour market, macroeconomics, personal finance, social science theory, and oral and written presentation skills (Skolverket, 2022). Civics 1a1 omits content related to political ideologies, macroeconomics, and social science theory.

Student performance is graded on a scale from A to F, with A representing the highest achievement and F meaning failure (Skolverket, 2017). The knowledge requirements delineate qualitative differences in student performance for grades E, C, and A. For example, a grade E knowledge requirement in civics states: "The student can also **briefly** outline human rights" (Skolverket, 2022). The progression to higher grades is

marked by increasingly complex descriptors (in bold), such as “extensively” for grade C and “extensively and nuancedly” for grade A. To get a grade E, C, or A, a student needs to fulfil all the knowledge requirements for that grade. For grades D and B, a student must fulfil all the knowledge requirements for the grade below and most of those for the grade above; i.e., to get a grade B a student needs to fulfil all the knowledge requirements for grade C and most of those for A.

In 2022, after the data collection, the grading process was changed, whereby teachers make an overall assessment of the student’s performance during the course and assign the grade that best reflects the student's knowledge. Further, the upper secondary school curriculum in Sweden was reformed in 2025 and the terminology was changed from courses to levels. The core content of the civics syllabus remains largely the same, but the grading criteria were significantly reformulated, mainly by being shortened and simplified (Skolverket, 2025a). These changes are discussed in the discussion section.

Civics is often characterised as an open and flexible subject with weak frames and lacking a defined canon (Hadley & Young, 2018; Öberg & Bäckström, 2021). This perception, largely based on curriculum analyses, has however been contested. Empirical research in Sweden suggests a more defined subject core, particularly in political science and economics (Odenstad, 2011; Olsson, 2016; Jansson, 2023). Thus, while the civics syllabus may appear vague, there is evidence of a shared core in teaching and assessment practices, suggesting the presence of a canonical tradition (Öberg & Bäckström, 2021). Nonetheless, significant variation in pedagogical and assessment approaches among teachers has been observed, often attributed to individual preferences.

The 1994 Swedish curriculum reform marked a shift from norm-referenced to criterion-referenced grading, emphasising reasoning and analytical skills (Wahlström & Sundberg, 2015). The 2011 reform further reinforced summative assessment, although a discourse around formative assessment has also emerged. Notably, civics lacks national standardised tests at the upper secondary level, unlike several other subjects (Lundahl, Hultén & Tveit, 2017). Consequently, Swedish teachers bear full responsibility for student assessment and grading, making their professional judgments crucial (Tveit & Lundahl, 2022).

Civics aims to foster civic competence (Torrez & Claunch-Lebsack, 2014), with a focus on citizenship, critical thinking, and reasoning (Wahlström, Adolfsson and Vogt, 2020; Sandahl, Tväråna & Jakobsson, 2022; Larsson & Andersson, 2023; Möllenborg, 2023). As citizens, students need certain factual knowledge, democratic problem-solving skills, and reflective thinking (Wahlström, Adolfsson & Vogt, 2020). This means they should be able to define problems, as well as discuss and argue for different solutions. Often, civics literature suggests using disciplined inquiry as a method to assess such skills (Torrez & Claunch-Lebsack, 2014).

Grading practices

Internationally, much research has been carried out on teachers' grading practices. A common finding is that grades are multidimensional (Brookhart *et al.*, 2016). This means that grades include different variables covering not only academic knowledge, but also factors such as engagement, persistence, and behaviour. Grades are often a "hodgepodge" of achievement, effort, behaviour, improvement, and attitudes. These do not receive equal treatment, however. Academic enablers like ability, effort, and participation are different from other nonachievement factors like student behaviour and personality. In determining grades, academic enablers are given more importance. Nonetheless, academic achievement is the most important factor in determining grades. Noncognitive factors are especially important for borderline grades, i.e. when a student's performance lies between two grades. In an American study (McMillan, 2001), social studies teachers gave more consideration to effort and participation when grading than mathematics and English teachers did. This suggests that the subject matter and traditions influence assessment practices.

Further, teachers primarily use written tests as major determinants of grades (Brookhart *et al.*, 2016). This is especially true for secondary school teachers, while primary school teachers use more informal evidence and performance assessments. However, grading practices vary from one teacher to another, which reflects differences in teachers' beliefs and values. Further, Vanlommel *et al.* (2021) found that intuition can affect assessments; for example, confirmation bias (first impressions influence future judgements) and personal criteria.

In the grading process, teachers need to weight various types of evidence of students' knowledge (Jönsson & Klapp, 2020; McMillan, 2024). In a study where teachers evaluated the same evidence, the teachers did not agree on the grade, which according the authors might be due to teachers weighting the criteria differently (Jönsson & Balan, 2018). Weighting requires teachers' professional judgment (McMillan, 2024). In weighting, according to McMillan, more important assignments should be given more weight. Assignments should be considered more important if the content aligns with learning goals, reflects instructional time spent, is most current, and is reliable. The reliability is higher the more items assignments include, and by using more assignments measuring each learning target (each criterion).

High validity also makes assignments more reliable (Jönsson, 2024; McMillan, 2024). This means teachers need evidence that covers the content and skills to be evaluated. Teachers must avoid construct irrelevance, i.e. not include non-academic aspects such as attendance and motivation, and underrepresentation (Messick, 1989; Jönsson, 2024). Therefore, assignments must be appropriate and sufficient to enable teachers to determine valid grades. The evidence needs to cover both all content and all criteria. In Sweden, this means that the evidence should align with the core content and the knowledge requirements of the syllabus (Jönsson, 2024).

Fairness is another quality of assessment. Four components of fairness are: transparent communication, appropriateness for individual students, absence of bias and students' opportunities to learn. Transparency means teachers should clarify the grading

criteria. Students should be aware of what content and skills are measured in the assignments and how these are evaluated, as well as the weight that each assignment is given in grading. In this way, transparency enables students to prepare properly, pulling them for success (Jansson & Löfgren, 2024). Fairness involves adapting assessments to individual student needs, giving students equal opportunities to demonstrate achievement (Tierney, 2013). Further, teachers need to avoid bias when designing and conducting assignments. Finally, instruction needs to be aligned with assessments, giving students opportunities to learn what is to be assessed. However, this last component is not explored in this study.

Research about civics teachers' assessment practices is scarce (Torrez and Claunch-Lebsack, 2014; Berg & Persson, 2020). Civics teachers' practices appear to deviate from the nature of civics, relying on written tests that primarily measure factual knowledge instead of performance assessments measuring reasoning skills (Mattson, 1989; Svingby, 1998; Brookhart & Durkin, 2003; Jansson, 2011; Odenstad, 2011; Curry & Smith, 2017). However, in a later study, civics teachers used a variety of assignments which also focused more on reasoning skills (Jansson, 2023). Also, teachers expressed that they achieved agency in their assessment work as they have freedom to choose which content and skills to assess and with which methods. Nonetheless, written assignments were more common than oral. Although civics is an open and flexible subject, there still seems to be a traditional canon of content and a core set of subject areas, mainly government and economics, which are emphasised in teachers' assessments (Odenstad, 2011; Öberg & Bäckström, 2021; Jansson, 2023).

Models for grading

Teachers can use a variety of strategies when grading (see also Jönsson, Balan & Hartell, 2021). Jönsson (2024) describes four different models for grading: arithmetic, intuitive, holistic, and continuous. In the arithmetic model, the teacher calculates the final grade from the various assignments completed over the year. The grade is based on the most common grade awarded on the assignments. Teachers using the arithmetic model commonly use numerical scores on assignments, whereby grades are assigned according to the grading thresholds for each assignment. In a Swedish study by Korp (2006), teachers using this model did not refer to grading criteria when grading.

The basis for grading is the student's overall performance, which teachers need to document. Teachers may keep all individual student's original submitted work for all assignments (tests, take-home assignments, etc.) as primary documentation. Another way is to document the teacher's evaluations of the students' performance on single assignments (for example grades or a grading rubric), which is secondary documentation (Jönsson, 2024).

Teachers using the intuitive model of grading use a combination of evidence, including results from assignments, attitude, lesson activity, and attendance (Jönsson, 2024). Teachers form a general impression of students' performance from these aspects, from which they determine the grade. The primary reference for these general impressions is not grading criteria but teachers' experience of teaching and grading the

students, which may be tacit knowledge, an experience-based and context-dependent know-how that is difficult to articulate or codify (Tsarkos, 2026). It is embedded in action, perception, and intuition, and is revealed mainly through practice rather than verbal explanation.

Under the continuous model of assessment, teachers assess each assignment in relation to the grading criteria and give a grade for each assignment (Jönsson, 2024). They can give an overall grade for the assignment or individual grades for each grading criterion measured in the specific assignment (for example, marking with different colours in a grade rubric). The teacher documents the assignment grades for each student and uses this secondary documentation when determining the final grade. The teacher determines the grade from the most common overall grade awarded on assignments, or from the most common level among the grading criteria. They can also weight various assignments differently depending on their importance regarding central content or criteria, or when they were done. The key aspect is that teachers use their secondary documentation and not the students' original assignments, which have been evaluated earlier.

Lastly, in the holistic model, teachers use their primary documentation (Jönsson, 2024). When grading, they compare the whole of this primary documentation with the grading criteria to determine the grade. The holistic model is also in line with grading directives from the Swedish National Agency for Education (Jönsson, 2024; Skolverket, 2025b), which stipulates that teachers use the overall picture of students' performance in relation to the grading criteria.

This is however rather time-consuming and in practice, Jönsson (2024) suggests that teachers use the continuous grading model, provided that teachers document student performance in a way that is comparable to the grading criteria. This means each performance is evaluated in relation to the grading criteria and summarised in a knowledge description. This secondary documentation then provides the basis for grading.

Method

This study investigates civics teachers' grading practices. For this purpose, semi-structured interviews were conducted (Bryman, 2016). Initially, in 2018,[1] all 108 civics teachers across upper secondary schools in 17 municipalities of varying sizes were invited to submit a set of assignments used in the introductory civics courses 1a1 and 1b. Of these, 16 teachers responded with submissions. This raises the possibility of sample bias; for instance, teachers who doubted the quality of their assignments may have opted not to participate. Nevertheless, the submitted assignments displayed considerable diversity, providing a rich dataset for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

[1] This means that the data collection was conducted prior to the breakthrough of generative AI and, consequently, before the Swedish National Agency for Education issued an advisory against using take-home assignments as a basis for grading (Skolverket, 2023).

All 16 respondents were subsequently invited to participate in interviews, of whom 13 agreed. The interviewees represented a range of backgrounds: six women and seven men, all but one of Swedish origin. They were employed in both public and independent schools, situated in urban and rural areas of varying sizes. All were experienced educators, having earned their civics teacher degrees between 1988 and 2014 (apart from one teacher only trained in other subjects). None had undertaken a formal course in assessment during their teacher training, as such courses only became mandatory for those commencing their training in 2011 (graduating in 2016). All but one had experience of teaching in both preparatory and vocational programmes, although at the time of the data collection, one was only teaching Civics 1a1 (the vocational programme course), four only Civics 1b (in preparatory), and eight were teaching both courses.

The interviews, conducted during spring 2019 at the teachers' respective schools, ranged from 46 to 106 minutes in duration. To encourage open dialogue, broad initial questions were posed, such as: "Can you describe how you conduct assessments?" and "Tell me how you grade a course." Follow-up questions explored their methods of documentation, weighting various assignments (including classroom activities), and borderline cases. Specific questions regarding the submitted assignments were also included. By the thirteenth interview, data saturation was deemed to have been reached. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

In accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2024), participants were informed, both prior to and during the interviews, about the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity was assured, and pseudonyms are used in all quoted excerpts. When translated, the language in the excerpts were corrected, while still maintaining the character of the spoken language.

Thematic analysis

To examine teachers' grading practices, thematic analysis was employed (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The interviews were analysed to identify themes concerning teachers' grading practices. The interview transcripts were read multiple times to ensure familiarity with the material. Initial codes were generated inductively, grounded in the empirical data. Regardless of their frequency, all potential codes were organised into preliminary thematic categories. These were subsequently refined into overarching themes and sub-themes, which were reviewed and revised iteratively to ensure clarity, coherence, and precise definitions. Four main themes resulted: documentation, deciding grades, weighting, and transparency. In the sub-themes regarding documentation, the concepts of primary and secondary documentation (Jönsson, 2024) were used, and regarding deciding grades, the grading models were used (Jönsson, 2024), while the sub-themes of weighting and transparency emerged from data. Interview excerpts are included to illustrate and support the identified themes.

The submitted assignments were categorised into different forms, with the main themes: oral, written, or multimedia, each with several sub-themes (for example

seminars, written tests, or podcasts). These were also complemented by types of assignments that teachers mentioned in the interviews (for more details, see Jansson, 2023).

Results

The teachers reported using between four and eight main assessments in the civics course, with fewer assessments in the shorter Civics 1a1. All used a variety of assignments, both written and oral, although written assignments predominated (Jansson, 2023). The most common forms were take-home assignments, written tests, and oral presentations, while preparatory programmes also included reports. Some teachers used seminars and debates, whereas other formats, such as role-plays, podcasts, or exhibitions, were rare (see Jansson, 2023 for more details).

Overall, four main themes characterised teachers' grading practices: documentation, deciding grades, weighting, and fairness. Teachers used their documentation of students' performance on different assignments when grading. Sometimes they needed to assign weight to these various assignments. Also, fairness in grading was found to be of importance.

Documentation

The sub-themes of documentation are primary and secondary documentation. The latter can take several different forms, i.e. digital or analogue, rubrics or grading tables.

TABLE 1
An example of part of a grade rubric

E	C	A
The student can **briefly** outline and analyse the organisation and social conditions of different societies as well as the underlying ideas.	The student can **extensively** outline and analyse the organisation and social conditions of different societies as well as the underlying ideas.	The student can **extensively and nuancedly** outline and analyse the organisation and social conditions of different societies as well as the underlying ideas.
The student can also **briefly** outline human rights.	The student can also **extensively** outline human rights.	The student can also **extensively and nuancedly** outline human rights.
In their analysis, the student explains **simple** connections and draws **simple** conclusions about similarities and differences between the organisation of different societies.	In their analysis, the student explains connections and draws **well-founded** conclusions about similarities and differences between the organisation of different societies.	In their analysis, the student explains **complex** connections and draws **well-founded and nuanced** conclusions about similarities and differences between the organisation of different societies.

Teachers primarily rely on secondary documentation, most commonly digital grading rubrics, but sometimes self-created. These rubrics link assignments to the national

knowledge requirements and students' recorded performance levels (E, C, or A) for each criterion (see an example in table 1). In the course Civics 1b/1a1, there are five grading criteria, but several teachers subdivide the criteria into smaller components, a practice also embedded in many digital grading systems. Rebecka explains:

> *I have created a task in SchoolSoft and linked all knowledge requirements to that task.*

She explains that the various assignments are linked to the knowledge requirements they are supposed to measure. Teachers mark student performance on each assignment in the rubric.

Other teachers used grading tables documenting an overall grade for each assignment or content area (see an example in table 2). In addition, a few kept analogue notes, mostly concerning classroom performance. Such informal evidence, however, was rarely systematically documented and was mainly retained in teachers' memory. As Nora reflected:

> *I feel, which is really sad, that you feel as a teacher that you should have to document everything so if someone questions grades, I should be able to explain why it has ended up there. And then you become some kind of rubric fascist, that you should tick off.*

Nora, like several others, feels she needs to document everything to be able to justify grades if questioned, and written documentation feels safer than memory.

Several teachers also had a practice of retaining students' original assignments (primary documentation). Daniel says:

> *I always keep the tests so I can go back and see my comments and if I'm unsure, I can see now what Kalle or Lisa answered here.*

He explains that primary documentation is mostly used in borderline cases; i.e. when grades are unclear, the teacher can revisit past assignments.

Grading discussions with colleagues were rare and mostly confined to cases where there is uncertainty. In such cases, teachers can show a colleague their documentation to get a second opinion.

In summary, the teachers mainly use secondary documentation in the form of grading rubrics. This is supplemented with primary documentation in borderline cases, in which some also chose to discuss the grading with colleagues. However, grading seems to be a mainly individual practice.

TABLE 2
An example of a grade table

Student	*Democracy*	*Human Rights*	*Personal finances*	*Economics*
Ali	*A*	A	C	A
Mary	C	E	C	E
Oscar	E	E	E	E

Deciding grades

In the theme deciding grades, the different grading models (Jönsson, 2024) were used as sub-themes. When determining final grades, teachers mainly use the continuous grading model, drawing on their accumulated secondary documentation. Grades are typically inferred from the overall pattern of rubric markings or the most frequent grade level. John says:

> *And then I get all the student's knowledge requirements linked to the assignments and to the students, and then I generally look at what average they have.*

He expresses that he looks at the grade rubric and the grade is determined from the "average" grade in this rubric. For example, a student who has performed mostly at E level will receive the grade E. At first glance, it might seem like the teachers are using arithmetic analysis based on a kind of mean score. However, the arithmetic model is mainly based on numerical scores, a practice not found to be common among the participating teachers (Jansson, 2023). Esther says, referring to her secondary documentation:

> *But in the grading, the way to get there I think is quite clear. We have thought through our tasks, we have made sure that all the knowledge requirements are covered, blah blah blah. But that's when I get to take out my papers and notes too, everything, and everything that I know about the student.*

She explains that the grades are based on assignments linked to grading criteria. Therefore, this practice should be considered continuous, in which teachers use secondary documentation for grading.

Teachers reported that most students perform fairly consistently at one level, making grading straightforward, as Erik states:

> *It's amazing how often they are consistently at E or C level or A level.*

In these cases, grading is easy. However, some students perform unevenly, which makes grading more complex. Lars explains:

> *Kalle is still at a level where he's met most of the A criteria, but not quite all of them. Then I can go back and see if there's something that shows he actually has — maybe I was a bit strict there, or maybe there was a lot we did in early stages that perhaps developed over the course.*

When Lars is uncertain of a grade, he can check the students' course assignments and reevaluate whether he might have been too "strict" in some cases. This is a kind of holistic grading model, using primary documentation. Lars also considers any progression made during the course. This is an example of weighting various performances, which is discussed below.

Several teachers also referred to professional judgement, reflecting an intuitive element in grading. Simon argued:

> *So, trusting your gut feeling — at least when you've worked a few years — you get pretty good at picking up on things in the oral parts,* […] *But also, when grading, instead of just sitting there and saying, "Okay, you've performed at E level five times, C level twice, so that probably means an E on that specific learning objective, which gives you this grade." That kind of*

> *mathematical calculation — that's the big downside of rubrics,* […] *You have to go with your gut: "What does the student actually know, and what don't they know?"*

Simon criticises arithmetic grading, and expresses that grading is also about a "gut feeling", an expression used by several teachers. This refers to tacit knowledge, a know-how shaped by experience. As such, this is an example of the intuitive grading model, though none of the teachers says anything about considering non-cognitive aspects in grading.

In summary, the teachers mainly use the continuous grading model based on secondary documentation. In borderline cases, the holistic model may be used, where teachers revisit their primary documentation. There is also an element of intuitive grading according to a "gut feeling", based on a tacit knowledge from experience.

Weighting various assignments

The teachers use a variety of assignments (Jansson, 2023), which need to be weighted when teachers decide the grades. In weighting students' performance in different assignments, four main sub-themes were identified: timing, criteria, content, and size. In terms of timing, assignments completed later in the course were generally weighted more heavily than earlier tasks. Alva explains:

> *Yes, the first task, when you've got them in year one, you have to take with a pinch of salt. Because they've just started and are generally just in a bit of chaos from beginning upper secondary school. Also, I don't know them yet, so my ability to make the individual adjustments needed is quite limited. So, I need to think that what I do then, I have to make sure I assess again. Then, the demands gradually increase once you've settled in a bit more with the group.*

Thus, according to Alva, early assignments are less important because students cannot necessarily be expected to perform well at this stage, and the teacher does not yet know the students, making assessment more uncertain. Also, students should progress during the course, improving learning and performing better in later assignments.

Certain knowledge requirements are given more weight than others, as Hanna explains when asked about what matters when weighting:

> *what knowledge requirements it is about, that I weight them differently, that the first ones that are in my rubric are the emphasis of the course. But the last criterion, that you can show your knowledge in civics in different presentation formats, that isn't weighted as heavily, because it's not as important based on the syllabus.*

As expressed by Hanna, the teachers mainly seem to give greater importance to the knowledge requirement on describing and discussing political and social issues. The criterion relating to source criticism is also important according to several of the teachers. These two criteria are central to the subject's character, in their view. On the other hand, the final knowledge requirement about being able to present knowledge both orally and in writing is given less importance.

Ideally, the teachers express that each knowledge requirement should be tested several times, giving students several chances to perform well. However, this is not always feasible. The teachers express concern about two specific knowledge criteria, concerning human rights and personal finances. Rebecca says that she:

> *always had a bit of a problem with personal finances, because it's this kind of knowledge requirement that is so dependent on everything else, a part that you only do once and depending on what the student achieves there, it can sometimes be decisive for the grade.*

She explains that because of lack of time resources, this specific criterion can only be assessed once. Thus, these knowledge requirements risk becoming decisive for the grades, even if the teachers may not want to weight them so heavily. To address this, several teachers said that they sometimes chose to give a second chance at the end of the course to those students whose grades would be lower due to any of the specific criteria.

Some content areas are also given more weight than others. Lars says:

> *Then, to some extent, in civics central content about politics is probably still weighted a little heavier.* […] *So that is probably weighted a little heavier, while, yes, economics is also weighted heavily, but maybe personal finances isn't weighted so heavily.*

As Lars expresses, content related to government and economics is the main core of civics and therefore given more weight in grading. Several teachers also emphasise source criticism as this is central in civics. Others mention human rights as heavily weighted, but this is partly because this content is also a specific knowledge requirement as described above. However, content seems to be less important for grades than time and knowledge criteria, as not all teachers mentioned it.

The size of the assignment also matters, as Lars expresses:

> *but they are weighted a little differently, they do. We have these essay tasks, or they will do a bigger task, they are probably weighted a little more heavily, because you see more different abilities.*

Lars explains that larger assignments are weighted more heavily than smaller ones, as they allow students to demonstrate multiple competencies. Smaller tasks are considered mainly in borderline cases and good performance on these can raise the final grade.

Certain other aspects are also mentioned by some teachers. Group work assignments, for instance, are not weighted heavily. Hanna says:

> *So I don't put as much emphasis on group work if it deviates from the rest. And these students are usually quite worried and come and talk to me too: "It hasn't worked so well in our group, I'm afraid of my grade" and then I usually explain to them how I reason.*

The main reason for group work being given less weight is the difficulty of identifying individual student performance, and some teachers even say they avoid group assignments because of this – a finding in line with previous research (Forsell, Forslund Frykedal & Chiriac, 2021).

Otherwise, the teachers primarily rely on students' written performance, such as paper-and-pencil tests, take-home assignments, essays, or reports. Reports are only used in preparatory programmes because social science methods are prescribed in the syllabus of Civics 1b, but not 1a1. Oral performance is most commonly assessed based on how students perform during class, though some teachers also conduct seminars and oral presentations. Thus, oral performance is not heavily weighted when grading. One reason is that these "tasks" are considered small, and as mentioned above, smaller tasks have less weight in grading. Oral tasks are also time-consuming because they need to be completed in small groups for the teacher to be able to assess individual student work. Another reason is the difficulty of documenting oral performance, especially during class. In formal assignments, like seminars, oral presentations, or role-playing, teachers may use a rubric for a specific task, and those tasks can also be heavily weighted in grading. Otherwise, teachers express that students' oral performance is mainly considered in borderline cases, as Maria describes:

> *But then I know that with this knowledge requirement, the student has perhaps, orally, shown that they can reason or draw conclusions, see connections or something like that, on a nuanced level and have had nuanced thoughts, then that could be something that raises [the grade].*

Maria explains that when a student's performance is evaluated as being between two grades, he or she can attain the higher grade by performing well during class.

Two teachers however report that they do not weight various assignments differently. Eric and Hanna state that all assignments are weighted alike, though Hanna says that group work is given less weight. Eric expresses that it is the student's best performance that will decide the grade, regardless of time, criteria, content, or size.

In summary, weighting assignments in grading mainly concerns the aspects of time, criteria, content, and size. Later assignments are more important than earlier ones; some knowledge criteria and content areas are more heavily emphasised than others; and lastly, bigger assignments are more important than smaller ones. Written assignments are the most frequently used type of assignment for grading, mainly because of difficulties in documenting informal oral performance in class.

Fairness

Teachers emphasised the importance of transparency to ensure that grades do not come as a surprise to students. Alva describes this practice:

> *Well, the way I work is that I always try, in each assignment, to make clear which part of the core content is being tested — either in the task description or in our learning platform. There, I usually link the core content, and also to the knowledge requirements I'm testing.*

Like Alva, the other teachers often use the wording of the grading criteria when giving feedback on individual assignments. Sometimes they also explain these orally before setting the assignment. They aim to make the students aware of which knowledge requirements are being assessed in each assignment. The teachers also continuously give formative feedback on the assignments. However, in practice, summative feedback

is given greater attention, and often teachers give summative feedback together with formative. This poses a risk that students may only focus on the summative feedback (Shute, 2008).

The teachers express that they adapt assessments to pull students for success (see also Jansson & Löfgren, 2024). Samuel describes how he makes adjustments for students with different abilities:

> *They do the written test, because I don't want them to avoid writing, but they can write, but then they can supplement [orally].*

Samuel explains that students with, for example, reading and writing difficulties have the option to complete an assignment orally. The teachers provide this opportunity mainly to help students get passing grades, but sometimes also to get a higher grade – for example, to give a student who lacks only a single requirement for a higher grade a second chance. Teachers can also adapt a final assignment, enabling students to demonstrate knowledge at a higher grade level in areas where they have not been successful previously. In this way, teachers adapt assessments to individual student needs, contributing to fairness.

Another way to pull students to success is to use various kinds of assignments, as Tomas says:

> *then it can be that some students are really good at written tests while others are in total panic and it can't be done. And conversely, it can be that some are really good at oral tests but much worse at writing, so I try to vary it all the time.*

Tomas underlines that students are different, and therefore, teachers vary their assignments. However, as described earlier, the teachers mainly use written assignments over oral (Jansson, 2023). Oral tasks are also given less weight in grading, which risks disadvantaging students who perform better orally.

The grading process is the same across both vocational and preparatory programmes. However, some teachers report that they use simplified assignments in vocational programmes. John says that among vocational students:

> *there are so few who have anything other than an E on the assignments. So it has been quite easy to assess students in that way, to set final grades. It is more difficult when students are on, for example, theoretical programmes, because they vary much more in their assignments.*

He explains that most vocational students are low achievers, making grading easy. According to the teachers, these students are less motivated in civics and thus perform at a lower level. In contrast, students in preparatory programmes tend to vary more in their performance, making grading more complex. However, this means a bias where grades depend on which programme students attend, affecting fairness.

In summary, teachers emphasise a transparent grading process, which contributes to fairness. They also seek to improve fairness by adapting assignments to student needs and by varying assignments. However, there can be a bias depending on which kind of programme students attend.

Discussion

This study contributes to increased insight into how upper secondary civics teachers assign grades regarding documentation and weighting. Further, it links grading practices to subject-specific consequences, particularly how assessment may shape civics as a subject. By elucidating teachers' grading practices, this study contributes to the development of more consistent and equitable assessment, thereby fostering greater fairness in grading.

The civics teachers in this study mainly use a continuous grading model based on secondary documentation. They check their grading rubrics to ascertain the mean level in relation to the criteria for the students' assignments or use a grade table to check for the most common grade. Several teachers also keep students' written assignments and supplement their grading with a holistic re-checking of primary documentation in borderline cases. However, there is also an element of the intuitive model at play in the form of "gut feelings". Though the holistic model is most consistent with policy (Jönsson, 2024; Skolverket, 2025b), the continuous model is what Jönsson (2024) considers the most reasonable practice, at least when using grade rubrics. The teachers seem to use a mixture of grading models, which may be argued to be rational. There is no need for a time-consuming continuous model in clear cases, while it is reasonable in borderline cases. Also, tacit knowledge (Tsarkos, 2026), gained from experience, might legitimise some use of intuition in grading, but not if intuition involves confirmation bias or personal criteria (Vanlommel *et al.*, 2021). This needs to be further explored. In sum, the empirical evidence demonstrates that the grading of civics in Swedish upper secondary school is not tied to a single model but is hybrid and practice-based, combining formal systems and tacit professional knowledge.

This study offers a new analytical framework for understanding weighting in grading, grounded in empirical data: time, criteria, content, and size. Teachers need to weight different assignments, particularly in borderline cases. Assignments completed later in the course are more heavily weighted, considering the progress students can be expected to have made over time. Some grading criteria are more heavily emphasised, mainly those concerning knowledge and reasoning about different political and social issues. Further, certain core content is given more weight, such as politics, economics, and human rights. Lastly, bigger assignments are logically seen as more important than smaller tasks. Sweden has undergone further grade reforms since the data collection of this study. However, the overall grading process should be similar regarding documentation and weighting. One big difference is that teachers are now expected to make an overall assessment and assign the grade that best reflects the student's knowledge, i.e. not all criteria for a grade need to be achieved. Therefore, the specific content criteria in the civics courses do not need to be as decisive as before. This makes the grading system less harsh, but more subjective, which places higher demands on teachers' professionalism in grading.

Teachers shape the subject through their teaching practice, and their assessments are of particular importance as research shows that they are crucial in determining what students perceive as important in the subject (Brookhart & Durkin, 2003; Olovsson,

2015; Löfgren, Löfgren & Lindberg, 2019). The emphasis on politics and economics, and the criteria relating to these areas, is in line with the nature of the subject and confirms earlier research suggesting the existence of a subject canon (Odenstad, 2011; Öberg & Bäckström, 2021; Jansson, 2023). Further, current issues is another subject characteristic, also expressed by the teachers. However, these do not have any major significance when grading. Furthermore, disciplined inquiry is often suggested in civics didactics (Torrez & Claunch-Lebsack, 2014) and social science methods are prescribed in the syllabus, but only for preparatory programmes. The teachers do use reports assignments in those programmes. Also, they express that source criticism is given weight in grading. Students in vocational programmes are limited to take-home assignments, which to some degree relate to these kinds of skills.

However, the teachers' grading practices can be problematised regarding other aspects. In civics, citizenship skills, such as defining problems and discussing and arguing for different solutions, are important (Torrez & Claunch-Lebsack, 2014; Wahlström, Adolfsson & Vogt, 2020; Sandahl, Tväråna & Jakobsson, 2022; Möllenborg, 2023). These skills are also expressed in the syllabus, and the grading criteria require both oral and written assignments. However, teachers measure these skills mainly via written assignments. Oral performance is not given much attention in grading and teachers mainly consider it in borderline cases. This poses a risk that students will not develop oral citizenship skills, as they tend to adapt their learning strategies to what is assessed. This is problematic from a democratic perspective if it limits the development of students' citizenship skills. It also risks disadvantaging students who perform better orally than in writing, affecting fairness in grading. However, conducting oral tasks can be problematic. Syverud (2026) found that teachers vary the questions posed from one student to another, regarding both content and skills. This influences what is assessed and teachers' evaluations of students' performance, affecting validity. However, the main reasons for avoiding oral assignments are practical, as teachers find them time-consuming and difficult to document.

Regarding validity, teachers seem to some degree to use appropriate evidence. They emphasise both content and skills mostly in line with the character of the subject and the syllabus. However, validity is lower regarding oral skills, as outlined above, in relation to both the nature of the subject and the syllabus. Unlike in other research (McMillan, 2001; Brookhart *et al.*, 2016), the teachers did not mention considering non-cognitive factors in grading, which strengthens validity as well as reliability (Messick, 1989; Kane, 2016; Jönsson, 2024). However, this was not explicitly asked for in the interviews, which may suggest that it is not a conscious and major influence on grades.

The teachers are keen to pull students for success (Jansson & Löfgren, 2024). Thus, transparency is important and the teachers express the need to explain and clarify the criteria used in the assignments. They also make efforts to vary and adapt assignments to individual student needs. Transparency and adaptation are components of fairness (Tierney, 2013). However, this transparency risks to limit students' learning. Also, adaptation can conflict with fairness if decisions are influenced by irrelevant aspects such as stereotypes and personal values. This is something teachers should be aware of, as well as considering bias regarding different programmes. Designing simplified tasks

in vocational programmes may make things easier for low achievers, but it can also inhibit vocational students who could potentially achieve more (Odenstad, 2011).

The teachers' assessment and grading practices were found to be idiosyncratic, as in earlier research. There is some consensus among the teachers regarding weighting, and they mostly agree on time, content, criteria, and size being important to consider when weighting different assignments in grading. Also, a subject tradition seems to have an influence, causing teacher's grading practices to converge. Still, there are some differences among the teachers, as they do not totally agree on these aspects and weight them differently. The teachers also express a lack of collegial discussions and collaboration regarding assessment and grading. This can be a strength as teachers may adapt teaching and assessment to their students' needs, without having to consider colleagues. However, it can also be a weakness if grading is unequal, as teachers' grades affect students' future opportunities when grades are used for selection. Also, differences in how teachers weight different assignments, can mean that students studying the same course learn different content and skills (Brookhart & Durkin, 2003; Olovsson, 2015; Löfgren, Löfgren & Lindberg, 2019), which may affect their future opportunities as citizens.

Limitations and future research

Reflexivity and the explicit acknowledgement of pre-understandings are central to qualitative research (Larsson, 2005), a position also emphasised within thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Knowledge is understood as co-constructed in the interaction between informant and interviewer, where the interviewer's perspectives and values may influence both data production and interpretation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). As a qualified and formerly practising upper secondary school teacher in social studies, my subject knowledge and professional experience facilitate an informed understanding of the informants' accounts and support the formulation of relevant follow-up questions. At the same time, such experience entails a risk of "home blindness", whereby taken-for-granted assumptions may shape the analytical process or remain unexamined. A shared professional background may also contribute to a sense of trust in the interview situation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). Interviews are further subject to limitations such as social desirability effects and potential biases related to memory and perception (David & Sutton, 2016). Further research could investigate the actual grading process by analysing the evidence teachers use (student performance) together with interviews during the process.

This study is confined to a small group of Swedish civics teachers working in upper secondary education. The diverse backgrounds and institutional contexts of the participants are likely to have encompassed much of the variation in assessment practices within the subject of civics in Sweden. These results may serve as a basis for "generalization through recognition of patterns" (Larsson, 2009). Some of the identified grading practices are assumed to be transferable to other subjects, except perhaps for civics-specific elements. Nonetheless, further research is required across different subjects and educational contexts. At present, there remains limited understanding of teachers'

grading practices, particularly regarding teachers' reasons when grading. Therefore, continued research is needed.

Conclusions

Although grading among upper secondary civics teachers is an individual practice, there is a high degree of consensus on what should be graded and how different assignments should be weighted. Thus, grading is in a way still a hodgepodge, though not due to the inclusion of irrelevant non-cognitive factors as found in earlier research (McMillan, 2001; Brookhart *et al.*, 2016). Instead, civics teachers seem to mainly use evidence that is relevant and therefore valid regarding most of the subject matter. Nonetheless, some subject knowledge is underrepresented, especially oral citizenship skills. Also, even if civics is considered open and flexible, a subject canon influences teachers' grading practices. Therefore, civics teachers' grading practices contribute to the reproduction of the civics subject.

The article's main contribution lies in demonstrating that grading in civics is a hybrid, practice-based activity structured by implicit weighting principles, which both sustain validity and reproduce subject-specific biases, raising important implications for fairness, democratic competence, and assessment policy. This knowledge can help both in-service teachers and trainee teachers develop their grading practices, strengthening validity and fairness as well as citizen education.

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