The development of grading requirements

Below outlines some of my thinking behind the grading requirements. It is for your interested to help understand where this all came from. Feel free to skip if you wish and jump to page 3. Please be aware that this is a 'fluid' or 'agile' approach. That means it is continuously being reviewed and enhanced.

Background

The development of a unifying grading requirements or syllabus in BJJ is lacking. Many individuals or organisations have developed their own take of the requirements, however most of these are set around the idea of techniques/content. For example a blue belt should be able to demonstrate arm bar from mount. A subsequent list of techniques is therefore drawn up and the student is tested on their ability to complete these techniques on a Uke/partner, whose function is to be fully compliant. This type of syllabus falls into the category of competencies, i.e., as long as the student can demonstrate the techniques the 'competency is met and the award given'. Such a tick box exercise is extremely common across all sectors of martial arts and beyond. Competency based assessment in healthcare for example is very common, i.e. taking blood pressure. Generally, this requires the performer to complete a number of steps with someone over-seeing and sign off that the performer is competent. The same is true of the theory component of a Judo grading, which, for example, has a list of techniques to demonstrate on a fully compliant Uke.

There are a number of reasons why I do not think this is the correct approach for BJJ grading requirements. I will list them below:

1. Learning by rote leads only to being able to 'demonstrate'.

If we are interested in learning we must consider the 'depth' of learning. This is equivalent to how much we 'own' the technique, what success percentage we have with it etc. The lowest level of learning is served by rote learning. i.e., "monkey see, monkey do". This results in only the most superficial depth of learning where NO understanding of the technique is developed. The student doesn't consider WHY a technique works or doesn't work. A deeper level of understanding of a technique will improve the success of the technique when applying it. This is extremely common, for example I can demonstrate sumi gaeshi but I cannot really 'hit' it in rolling. As mentioned before this is extremely common. Rote learning achieves the depth of learning labelled 'demonstrate', but no deeper.

2. Apply and success rates.

BJJ has always had a strong focus on the (successful) application of techniques. i.e., getting them to actually work during rolling or sparring. Again this sets it apart from some other martial arts. The ability to apply something during rolling is a better measure of the depth that a technique has been learnt/understood. Demonstrating a rear naked choke on a compliant Uke is straight forward and requires little learning/skill development, however APPLYING a rear naked choke to an individual resisting and trying to escape your back control, requires a whole new level and depth of learning/understanding. This is truly the essence of BJJ from its origins and better reflects the learning of the student. This is something which requires time and skill to develop. Taking a technique you 'know' and developing it to the point where you can 'apply' it successfully with ever increase success percentage is really what should be used to determine learning. To this end, it is more akin to boxing or wrestling than traditional martial arts.

3. Freedom of expression.

BJJ is highly individual. Whether this is because of the background of the student or because of their natural body attributes or as a result of their environment, all BJJ students develop a style. This set of positions, techniques, defences etc. are unique and are to be encouraged. A fixed set of techniques that you must be able to demonstrate

(as in a competencies-based curriculum) removes this individual expression but also separates the 'grading' from the 'performance'. For example, the conversation – "why are you practicing that?...because it is in the grading, but I will never use it, it doesn't suit me" would be common. In this situation the learning and the 'test' (the grading) are not aligned, therefore the grading becomes disingenuous for the student. Take those famous BJJ athletes…you can immediately identify their style and this likely comes from (as mentioned above) their background, attributes or the environment. Richie 'the boogeymen' Martinez and his extreme rubber guard, born out of the gift of extreme flexibility. Compare that to Nick Rodriguez with a strength background and a completely different style – no rubber guard there. For Nick to spend years training to do rubber guard 'just for a grading', would be disingenuous. So a grading framework should allow for the refinement of techniques that suit the individual attributes and therefore should be born out of choice for the athlete.

Therefore, we end up with grading requirements that are 'outcomes based', where 'testing' aligns with the development of depth of learning and is centred on the application and success of the techniques.

'Grading'

The idea of a formal 'time' where a grading takes place, providing students with the opportunity to demonstrate their techniques is an idea born out of other martial arts. In light of a syllabus that is not competency based; no such grading days are required. Instead, an instructor or series of instructors will seek to 'observe' the performance of specific aspects of the grading elements during normal classes. This can of course be during normal rolling, however; this may be better served through a series of simulations or positional/situation rolling, with so called constraints attached. For example, if an instructor is working on side control for the month, then following the development of knowledge (instructional stuff), a series of rounds of rolling looking at control and escape would provide the perfect opportunity to capture the skills of the students in either maintaining control or escaping. The situation "you are 1 point ahead with 60 secs remaining – maintain side control to win", therefore develops the student on top's ability to apply their knowledge of controlling the Uke. Conversely "you are 1 point behind and need to reverse this pin to win" encourages the student on the bottom to seek to escape. Another example of how this is applied is the 'seek the submission' game. Often during rolling students resort to their 'A game' and disregard/forget that other subs are available. A simple submission seeking game could be set up where one student is tasked with seeking say a kimura – from any position. Therefore, they are looking for it from the guard, but this leads to a sweep, now they are still looking for it from the resultant position, say side control. This will 'open their eyes' to set ups usually missed as they are looking for their A-game subs only. This would provide the instructors again with the opportunity to 'see' students achieving the success needed to demonstrate the ability to apply subs from differing positions.

So, at HampshireBJJ we will be looking for individuals to be applying their chosen techniques throughout the months of training, whenever the opportunity arises. During club rolling winning is not related grading. Successful (and even unsuccessful) application of a breadth of techniques is what is associated with grading. Learning. Are you progressing all elements of your Jiu-Jitsu?

Open mats are the perfect opportunity to develop your ability to win. Use these to enforce your A-game to seek and destroy. These are for winning.

Grading requirements - Blue Belt

The focus of the white to blue transition is the acquisition of techniques and the enhancement of their efficacy. Perfection is not the aim, effectiveness/success is and the encouragement of developing a wide breadth of techniques.

Notes:

- All techniques are free choice for the athlete. i.e. single leg take down could be heal pick, high crotch or anything they wish).
- All techniques should be demonstrable through rolling against white belts or above.
- The athlete should be prepared to demonstrate any of the chosen techniques on request using a fully compliant Uke/partner.
- Escape can include a re-guard or a reversal. Maintaining the pin can involve a transition to another position (on top) but ideally a rapid return to the original position is required (scarf to side-control back to scarf).

Successfully apply the following

Standing - Attacking

1. Single leg takedown.
2. Double leg takedown.
3. One forward throw (in the direction uke is facing).
4. One rear throw.
5. One foot sweep.

Standing - Defending

1. Single leg takedown defence.
2. Double leg takedown defence.

Mount – Attacking

1. Maintain Mount control for 2 mins.
2. Apply 3 submissions (to include both choke and arm lock).

Mount – Defending

1. Apply 3 escapes.

KoB – Attacking

- Maintain position for 1 min.
- Transfer to 2 higher ordered positions (i.e. mount and back).
- Apply 2 submissions.

KoB – Defending

- Apply 2 escapes.

Side Control – Attacking

- Maintain position for 2 mins.
- Apply 3 submission.

Side Control – Defending

- Apply 3 escapes.

Scarf Hold – Attacking

- Maintain position for 2 mins.
- 3 subs.

Scarf Hold – Defending

- 3 escapes.

North-South – Attacking

- Maintain position for 1 min.
- 2 subs.

North-South – Defending

- 2 escapes.

Back control – Attacking

- Maintain position for 2 min.
- 3 subs.

Back control – Defending

- Apply escape.

Guard – Attacking

- 5 sweeps (standing and kneeling).
- 1 back take.
- 5 submissions.

Guard – Defending

- Maintain position (retain guard) for 2 mins.
- Straight foot lock defence.

Guard – passing

- 5 passes to a control position.

½ guard – Attacking

- Back take.
- 2 Sweeps.
- Re guard.
- Stand up from ½ guard.

Turtle – Attacking

- Control to take back.
- 1 alternate attack.

Turtle – Defending

- Avoid back take or turn over 1 min.

A worked example

Student A.

Takedowns	Name	Success	Comments
Single leg takedown	Heal pick		
Forward throw	O Goshi		
Rear throw	Uranage		
Sweep	O Uchi gari		
SL defence			
DL defence			

Purple Belt

The focus of the blue to purple transition is the refinement of techniques, the enhancement of their efficacy and widening the repertoire of set-ups. Perfection is not the aim, effectiveness/success is and the encouragement of developing a deeper knowledge of the details of each of the chosen techniques is emphasised.

At purple belt the athlete should focus on developing higher success rates for their chosen techniques. However, they also should be developing more advanced set up for submissions. The number or nature of their submissions may not increase much but the ability to apply them from multiple positions will. For example, the blue belt might have developed a strong triangle from guard but doesn't apply (or ever look for this) from any other position, the purple belt will have developed multiple entries to triangle from guard but also be able to apply it from side control (sangaku) and mount. Therefore, the same basic requirements exist for purple as blue. It is not necessary to have 18 mount submissions, 3 is good, but the complexity of success changes as they are being applied to higher grades (i.e., blue belts). These higher grades will have more developed defences and therefore more sophisticated set-ups are required as is the retention and application of the additional details.

At this stage there is a strong realisation of the importance of guard and its variants, sit up guard, shin to shin, de la riva etc. As athletes move on through BJJ it is clear that ever increasing amounts of time are spent in guard or trying to pass guard therefore the notion of guard control, guard retention, guard passing are all features emphasised in the to the blue-purple transition.

Notes:

- All techniques are free choice for the athlete. i.e. single leg take down could be heal pick, high crotch or anything they wish).
- All techniques should be demonstrable through rolling against higher white belts/blue belts or above.
- The athlete should be prepared to demonstrate any of the chosen techniques on request using a fully compliant Uke.
- Escape can include a re-guard or a reversal. Maintaining the pin can involve a transition to another position (on top) but ideally a rapid return to the original position is required (scarf to side-control back to scarf).

In addition to that outlined for blue belt above…

Guard passes – successful pass guards including but not limited to some of the guards in the list below.

Guard retention – successfully retain guard for 2 minutes using at least 3 of the guards listed.

Guard attacks – successful apply a series of guard attacks from at least 3 of the guards listed. These don't need to be submissions, they could be sweeps, access to the back etc.,

<u>Common Guards (not exhaustive list)</u>

Collar sleeve; De la Riva; reverse De la Riva; Butterfly guard, Sit-up guard; Shin-to-shin; Single leg X-guard; X-guard; spider; Lasso etc.,