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Shifting the Grading Mindset Starts With Our Words

By [Starr Sackstein](#) on February 14, 2016 7:54 AM

Language matters. It's that simple. What we say and how we say it has a big impact on how students and other stakeholders respond to our choices.

Students are always waiting from a variety of cues from their teachers and peers to determine what and how much they are learning. So rather than perpetuate the issues around grading by using the same language we've always used, it's time to be deliberate in the shift as we change our assessment practices.

Getting rid of grades is a big and challenging step to make, but it can be done and even if you aren't ready to go all in, there are ways to adjust small things in the classroom that will lead to important growth for students.

Start with the words you use when communicating learning.

Look at the below chart from [Hacking Assessment](#):

Grades vocabulary	No-grades vocabulary
grading	assessing
score	assess
"What grade did I get?"	"What did I learn?"
"This is wrong."	"Try another way."
problem	challenge, opportunity
judgment or criticism	feedback
get good grades	achieve proficiency or mastery

The traditional grading language is passive and judgmental and subconsciously by using this language, we are putting the focus on the wrong things.

When we say to each other or to kids that we are "grading", it reduces the work that we are trying to do. What we are actually doing is "assessing" growth and understanding.

Rather than "scoring", again use "assessing" because we are spending time trying to see what students know and can do. When we start to adjust what we call what we are doing, students will do the same.

"**What grade did I get?**" or some variation like "What did I get?" is a question that most teachers don't enjoy having to answer. But imagine if we could get student to think instead, "What did I learn?" This has the opportunity to be a rich conversation. So parents reading this, fight the urge to ask your child, "What did you get on the test?" and instead ask, "What did you learn in school today?"

When students see a red x on their papers or we tell them they are wrong, we are shutting them down and ending a potential learning experience. Why not say that "you aren't there yet" or "try another way" to encourage students to keep going.

As we start to shift our words, the behaviors will follow. And once all of these things are in sync with each other, then changing the way we assess in class becomes the next logical step.

Learning should be equipped with an endless feedback loop rather than a terminal grade. Start the loop of communication by changing the words you use in conversation about learning and then it will become about the mastery instead of getting great grades on a **report card**.

Think about the words you use in class. Which ones can have potentially negative connotations and how can they be adjusted for a growth mindset? Remember, words matter.

How can you shift the way you talk about learning in your space to impact growth in your students? Please share

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