

Response: Making Grading Practices 'Specific, Constructive & Timely'

By [Larry Ferlazzo](#) on June 4, 2016 9:51 AM



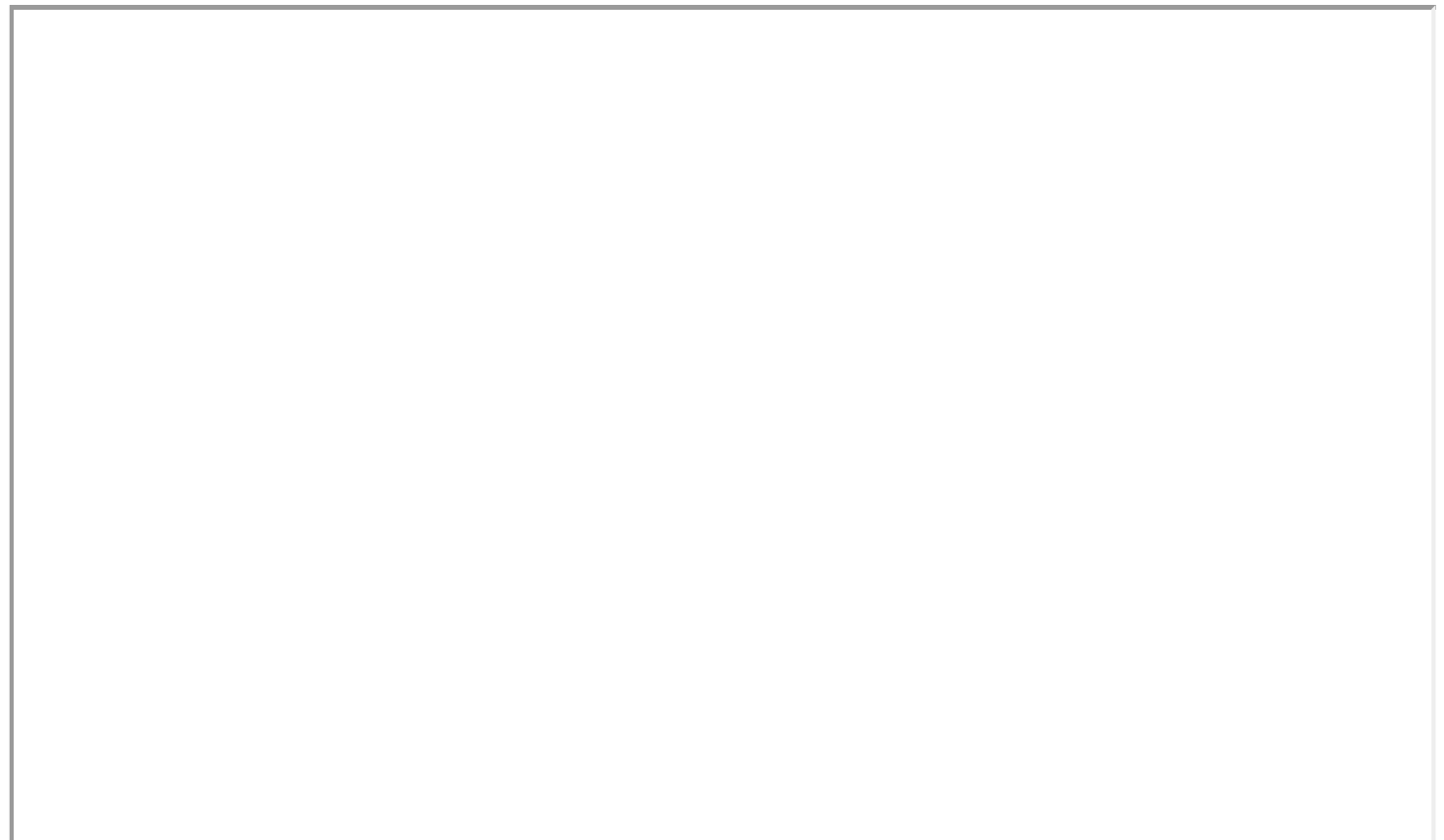
This week's question is:

What Are The Best Types Of Grading Practices?

Grades - students are often asking for their latest, our school district computer software is always telling us to input new ones, and parents are concerned about them.

What are the best ways for teachers to use them, talk about them, and not be driven crazy by them?

Today, Myron Dueck, Kristina Doubet, Jessica A. Hockett, Roxanna Elden, Mark Barnes and Bill Ivey share their suggestions. You can listen to a [ten-minute conversation](#) I had with Myron and Kristina on [my BAM! Radio Show](#). You can also find a list of, and links to, [previous shows here](#).



This question, or a related one, has been asked a few times over the years, and you can

see earlier responses at [Student Assessment](#).

I've also compiled another collection titled [The Best Resources On Grading Practices](#).

Response From Myron Dueck

Myron Dueck is the author of [Grading Smarter Not Harder: Assessment Strategies That Motivate Kids and Help Them Learn](#) (ASCD, 2014). He is currently a vice-principal and teacher in School District 67 in British Columbia, Canada and previously taught in Manitoba and on the South Island of New Zealand. Dueck has presented his student-friendly assessment procedures at conferences worldwide.

*It is difficult to separate the topic of effective grading practices from the big-picture elements of **purpose** and **assessment**. In countless classrooms there are grading practices that fundamentally undermine the purpose of education. To illustrate this point, we could ask every teacher on earth to clearly explain, in one sentence, what his or her basic purpose is of instruction, grading and reporting. We might quickly determine the most effective grading strategies.*

The following would be my three responses to these questions:

What is the purpose of your instruction?

Myron: "I plan activities and lessons for my students which help them understand the content, material and concepts that make up the established learning outcomes. "

What is the purpose of grading?

Myron: "By grading according to product criteria linked clearly to learning outcomes, I want to establish the extent to which my students and I have met the standards. "

What is the purpose of reporting?

Myron: "Reporting is the process by which we communicate in some formal way to those outside my classroom how each student has performed on the learning standards - remembering to report on academics and behaviors separately."

Once we establish our purposes, then it is much easier to focus on the practices that uphold them. Let's look at traditional homework grading through this thought process:

Purposes of homework: (1) To have students practice an existing concept. (2) To have students better understand concepts and processes so as to improve their understanding. (3) To have students prepare for a classroom activity by engaging in reading or research.

Traditional grading practice: Grade homework assignments such as worksheets and textbook questions and include the data in the summative grade for the student.

Problems with this practice: The teacher spends a lot of time grading worksheets and textbook questions are easily copied between students and therefore individual student understanding is impossible to determine. Grading someone's trial and error strategy and incorporating it into the final grade is a highly questionable practice, especially in light of the fact that some have more stable, academically-supportive home environments.

Possible solution:

The teacher moves to a policy that summative grades will be based on in-class work only, unless the student has begun working on a personalized project in class and simply needs a little more time to complete it at home.

If the teacher considers it essential to have students practice concepts at home, the teacher can move to an in-class quiz system to measure the extent to which the practice has been effective. For instance, the teacher may assign a 20-question Math homework worksheet, and strongly encourage students to do the problems. Students (and parents) can check the answers as the solutions are included on the teacher's website. The following morning all students take a very short quiz to determine if the previous day's concepts have 'stuck'. Students who struggle on the quiz are asked to show homework assignments, come in for help and can be re-assessed.

This grading change works as it fits with the purpose of instruction, grading and reporting. As well, it fits with the purpose of homework. In short, the best grading practices uphold the best purposes.

"In countless classrooms there are grading practices that fundamentally undermine the purpose of education."

Myron Dueck in Education Week Teacher

Response From Kristina Doubet & Jessica A. Hockett

Jessica A. Hockett, Ph.D. and Kristina J. Doubet, Ph.D. are the co-authors of *Differentiation in Middle and High School: Strategies to Engage All Learners* (ASCD). They are also members of the **ASCD Faculty** and consultants who work with practicing teachers of all grade levels - nationally and abroad - on the topics of curriculum, assessment, and differentiated instruction. Follow them on Twitter @DIY_Diff and on Instagram @d.i.y_di:

Many best practices in grading can fit under one of two guidelines.

(1) *Use "3Ps" to figure and report grades.*

Generally speaking, students - and their parents - want to know how they are doing in a class or subject in terms of the following:

- *The student's **performance** relative to goals or standards in the content area*
- *The student's **progress**, or growth toward those goals over the course of a marking period*
- *The student's **process**, or work habits and behaviors in the class.*

*Most teachers **do** consider these factors, but they usually meld them into a single grade. This can lead to grade inflation (or deflation) and cloud the meaning of the grade. Did Johnny get a C- in math because he didn't turn in homework but did well on tests? Or because he really earned a D but his teacher noticed he was trying hard to improve? Or because he did C work but lost points for participation and attendance? It's not clear.*

*A grading and reporting system that allows teachers to report the 3Ps **separately** can communicate more accurate and complete information about student learning. Johnny's teacher would be able to report evidence of how well he mastered concepts and skills (performance), of how much he grew relative to where he started during that grading period (progress), and of how consistently he engaged in work habits that the school or district considers important, such as turning work in on time (process). This approach can work, even in a traditional system, simply by reporting three different grades, one for each "P". Where GPAs must be calculated, use only the performance grade.*

(2) In evaluating student performance, emphasize recent evidence generated later in the learning process.

Even without a 3P reporting system, students' grades should be based on their performance against clear standards. When it comes to figuring this grade, experts agree that teachers should primarily rely on - and weight more heavily - evidence produced by students later in the learning cycle rather than earlier. Work a student completes toward the end of an instructional sequence paints a more accurate picture of what the student has learned than does work produced earlier when he or she is still making sense of the learning goals. Therefore, summative assessments should be the primary data source for grading--which is why it's important to administer several summative assessments in and across units (e.g., tests and performance assessments).

Formative assessments - worked produced "along the way" - should be weighted less, with students' responses on Exit Slips, in-class sense-making tasks, and some practice work excluded from a grade altogether; such tasks reflect how both the students and the teacher are grappling with and adjusting to instruction. And pre-assessment results should never be included in a grade, as pre-assessments gauge what students have learned before instruction begins.

Adhering to these guidelines increases both 1) the validity of a grade's reflection of academic standing, and 2) clarity in the reporting of student performance progress.

"...students' grades should be based on their performance against clear standards. When it comes to figuring this grade, experts agree that teachers should primarily rely on - and weight more heavily - evidence produced by students later in the learning cycle rather than earlier."

- Kristina Doubet & Jessica A. Hockett in *Ed Week Teacher*

Response From Roxanna Elden

Roxanna Elden is a National Board Certified Teacher in Miami. She is the author of [See Me After Class: Advice for Teachers by Teachers](#), and blogs at www.seemeafterclass.net:

The best grading is specific, constructive, and back in students' hands in a timely fashion. Most teachers agree with this. Research shows this. And, let's be honest, you knew it anyway. So why haven't you finished grading that pile on your desk? And why is grading the part of the job most likely to cover our kitchen tables, ruin our weekends, and never,

ever be finished?

Part of the answer comes down to simple math. Ten minutes worth of detailed comments per paper on 150 high school essays equals 25 hours of grading. The same goes for grading thirty elementary students' work in five different subjects. Even one minute per assignment adds up to two and a half hours--and students do more than one assignment each week.

Yet the topic of tradeoffs is notably missing from discussions of giving feedback to students. Teachers know constructive, specific, timely feedback is important. At the same time, we know much of the grading we do probably isn't perfect. And if it's perfect, it probably isn't done.

As a teacher who taught high school writing classes for many years, I have lots of experience staring down paralyzing paper piles. My book chapter, "Grading Work Without Hating Work," offers tips for balancing speed with specificity, but I've developed a tool for my own classes that I call "The Holistic Grading Half-Sheet," which is available for Larry Ferlazzo's readers at the link below.

By keeping a stack of these forms on hand and arranging the assignment section of your board to match the format, you can focus students' attention on following the directions. (Back me up on this, teachers: the only thing more frustrating than writing the same comments on twenty different papers is re-explaining the directions in your comments on twenty different papers.) Then, when you grade papers, you can expand or contract your level of feedback as needed. If you want to give students detailed guidance, you can write comments in the blank space on the sheet. Other times, if an assignment is mostly for review purposes or report card day is right around the corner, you can check off the categories and give a grade that is largely holistic. You can download the form and read more detailed instructions [here](#).

"The best grading is specific, constructive, and back in students' hands in a timely fashion."

- Roxanna Elden in Education Week Teacher

Response From Mark Barnes

Mark Barnes is a longtime teacher and author of six education books, including *Assessment 3.0: Throw Out Your Grade Book and Inspire Learning* and *The Five-Minute Teacher*. Mark is the publisher of the popular blog, *Brilliant or Insane*, and the new Hack Learning Series. His first book, *Role Reversal: Achieving Uncommonly Excellent Results in the Student-Centered Classroom*, was named Best Professional Book by Teacher Librarian Magazine in 2013. Follow Mark on Twitter @markbarnes19:

This answer may seem a bit counterintuitive, but I hope you'll bear with me. I can't say which types of grading practices are best, because there is nothing good about traditional grading. Learning can't be measured, and the sooner education stakeholders understand this, the faster teaching and learning will evolve. Sure, a teacher can give students 20 questions and score the work at 50 percent and grade it an F, based on this math. The problems with this system, though, are legion.

In some cases, students don't finish the task (maybe they got distracted or fell ill). In other cases, they could probably answer the questions verbally, but they can't process their thoughts to the paper or the computer, so they leave items blank or answer them incorrectly. Any point, percentage, or grade is misleading at best and downright fictitious at

worst. Hence, I'll take the liberty of changing the question to, *What Are the Best Types of Assessment Practices? It's high time that educators throw out grading and focus on assessment through observation and feedback.*

The best assessment practice is the only one that can truly demonstrate that learning has happened, and this practice is ongoing conversation about learning. When students complete activities, teachers must discuss the work with them. They must ask questions: What did you do? Where are you heading with this? Why did you choose this method? What if you tried this instead? What don't you understand? What do you think you should do next?

The answers to any or all of these questions drive further instruction, which leads to iteration, more observation, and, in many cases, more discussion. Naysayers push back against the ongoing conversation model of assessment, suggesting that teachers don't have time for this kind of exhaustive dialogue. Fortunately, the digital world makes facilitating ongoing conversations about learning easy and immediate. Furthermore, not every bit of feedback needs to be written.

Sometimes, the best assessment happens during a one- or two-minute conversation between teacher and student. And how could time be better spent?

"The best assessment practice is the only one that can truly demonstrate that learning has happened, and this practice is ongoing conversation about learning."

- Mark Barnes in Education Week Teacher

Response From Bill Ivey

Bill Ivey is Middle School Dean at [Stoneleigh-Burnham School](#), a feminist girls school in Greenfield, Massachusetts:

It was ten years ago, and [Rick Wormeli](#) had given me permission to share a portion of his classic [Fair Is Not Always Equal](#) with the middle school team. We were in the third year of the program that had expanded our small girls school from grades 9-12 to grades 7-12, and I thought it was time to reexamine our original assessment and reporting design, specifically letter grades. Did they accurately communicate what we knew about each students? Were they developmentally appropriate? What did the National Middle School Association (now the [Association of Middle Level Education](#)) document "[This We Believe](#)," which we had adopted as our guiding principles, have to tell us?

We quickly decided that a letter grade told kids and parents next to nothing about where a student was doing well and where she needed to improve, and that the implied hierarchy behind a letter grades system was probably even worse for young adolescents than for kids

at any other age. This was before Daniel Pink's *Drive* had been published and before Alfie Kohn's article "*The Case Against Grades*" also helped convince any number of people that letter grades were so powerful an extrinsic motivator that one could never hope to do a sufficiently good job of building intrinsic motivation with that system in place.

So I was delighted when our art teacher said, "If it's clear it's in the best interest of the kids to change the system, why wait? Why not do it now?" We ended up deciding we needed a year to study the new standards-based system we were contemplating. During that year, we had long and passionate discussions of the ins and outs of the new system, for one example the question "So what do I write at the top of the page?" Eventually, we realized that just as letter grades reduce a wealth of knowledge about how well a student is doing down to one semi-meaningless indicator, so, too, would any attempt at aggregation. Standards-specific input was just so much more helpful. One implication of that realization was our understanding that we were starting to view learning more explicitly as a process and less as a series of products.

We also involved parents in the discussion by linking from a newsletter to a draft of the new progress report design, and also inviting further feedback at a meeting on Spring Family Weekend.

When we implemented the new system with the kids, there was of course some pushback. There was also support. We had always incorporated significant opportunities for students to self-reflect on their work, as we felt that was crucial to their becoming self-aware and self-directed learners, and we noticed a subtle shift over time. They began, just as had happened with us, to focus more on a continuous process of learning and less on outcomes, which for them also meant increasingly making their own judgments about what was going well and where they needed to improve rather than simply waiting to be told. In short, the positive effect on intrinsic motivation for which we had been hoping was indeed taking place.

At this point, were we to change the system, I would suggest focusing on descriptive narrative comments alone, as Alfie Kohn has suggested. We know the importance of formative feedback in conversation. But at this point in my career, I cannot contemplate working at a school that used letter grades and gave all power in grading to teachers. The effects of focusing on process and of incorporating student reflection are just too clear and too positive.

"We had always incorporated significant opportunities for students to self-reflect on their work, as we felt that was crucial to their becoming self-aware and self-directed learners..."

- Bill Ivey in Education Week Teacher