# How I Revamped My Grading System

*Michelle Vanhala*

**A science teacher reflects on her path to finding a grading system that reflects her educational philosophy.**

My student Jacob loved to skateboard. His evenings were spent at the local park with friends, perfecting his ollies and definitely not doing homework, as I, his physics teacher, quickly came to realize. Despite his refusal to work outside of class, his careful attention during my lectures and strong math background contributed to high quiz and test scores. Based on our interactions, it seemed obvious to me that Jacob "got it" on most physics concepts. He had a *C+* in my class.

Whitney was a perfectionist. She color-coded her notes and meticulously recorded even the most minute details into her notebook. She realized that in order to get into the University of Michigan, where her parents worked, she needed all *A*s in her classes. She always turned her completed work in on time, and whenever her grade dropped, she stayed after class to request extra credit opportunities. Despite her perfect homework score, patterns in her assessments revealed some persisting misconceptions. Whitney had an *A-* in my class.

It was 2014, and I was a first-year chemistry and physics teacher at a rural, public high school in southeastern Michigan. On most days, I provided direct instruction while students filled in guided notes and then completed practice problems. Any unfinished problems were done as homework, due at the start of class the next day. My assessments were mostly multiple choice so that I could quickly run bubble sheets through the Scantron machine to get a number to enter online. Eighty percent of each student's grade came from these types of assessments, while homework and classwork accounted for 20 percent.

In meeting with students and parents, I saw frustrating patterns: There were many students (like Whitney) who had high averages on homework and classwork, but disappointing quiz and test scores. "My daughter gets test anxiety. She just doesn't test well," one parent rationalized. "How can my son study better for the tests? Is there a study guide that shows what will be on the test?" another asked. She may indeed have had some test anxiety and he certainly may have benefitted from more studying, but I struggled to articulate the real problem, which was that these students just didn't understand the content well, despite near perfect homework grades.

On the flip side, there were students like Jacob who aced their tests, but failed to complete or turn in homework. Their low homework scores brought their grades down significantly. "Is there any extra credit?" was the common question I got from those students and their parents. A last-ditch attempt to earn credit often turned into a negotiation: "What if he can turn in all of these missing homework assignments this week? Do you think that could bring him up to a *B* for the class?"

In the years since 2014, I've attended multiple professional development sessions and workshops centered around issues of grading. I've heard similar frustrations echoed by teachers across the country. The blame is often placed on the students rather than teachers acknowledging the issues inherent in the system that promote a grade-centered mindset: "Students need to take responsibility and ownership of how their choices affect their grade," I've heard.

While there is truth in these assertions, I've often wondered: To what degree are the grades I assign reflective of what my students actually know? Am I just assessing compliance? In what ways is our educational system set up to perpetuate this grade-centric mindset, and how can we as teachers leverage meaningful change? How can we cultivate responsibility and ownership of not just grades, but of the *learning* that the grade should reflect?

## The "No Grade Plan"

I don't have all of the answers, but these questions make me think back to a teacher I had my first year of college, Dr. Phame Camarena.

Dr. Camarena, or Phame, as he asked us to call him, organized his human growth and development class to be a balance of direct instruction, activities, discussions, guest speakers, and group projects, all designed to introduce the foundational theories of sociology in the context of education. The capstone project for the course was known affectionately as "The PDP": The Personal Development Project. While teaching us about the theories behind childhood, adolescence, and adulthood development, Phame wanted us to experience these concepts in action. He challenged us to complete 10 activities that stretched our comfort zone and to reflect on these experiences in a summative portfolio assessment. One student became a vegetarian for a month as part of this project, someone else spent a week walking to class without shoes, and some of us even went to a local dance club for the first time in our lives.

One activity that Phame presented to us that fulfilled a requirement for this assignment was the "No Grade Plan." "This is for those of you who are perfectionists," he explained. "It's for the students who check their grades online every day and obsess about anything less than an *A*." The student he was describing was 100-percent me, and I knew that the "No Grade Plan" would be a significant personal challenge.

The handful of students who opted in to the "No Grade Plan," which included me, received detailed feedback from Phame. Every assignment for the course was returned with up to a page of responses and questions. The assignments did not, however, have a final score or grade on them. Phame kept that numerical grade secret until the final report card.

At first, I was fine with this. "I am an all *A*s student after all, so what do I need to worry about?" was my initial reaction. My anxiety grew, however, after skimming through Phame's helpful but lengthy feedback on my first essay. I remember attempting to tally up a final score: "Three questions and one positive comment … . My classmates got a score out of 10 points on this assignment, so I probably got 8 out of 10." I reasoned. "Is that a *B*-?"

At a certain point, I began to come to terms with the realization that there was no way for me to quantify the feedback I was receiving. My attention turned instead to the content of the comments, and I worked with each successive assignment to address Phame's questions. With each draft, I began to think deeper and more critically, organizing my thoughts more coherently based on his feedback. By the end of the semester, I was confident that I had not only learned the class content thoroughly, but that I had also grown in my communication and writing abilities. I couldn't predict my exact grade, but I was confident that I would do well enough. I also appreciated that there was something unquantifiable about my learning and growth that semester.

# Grading for Learning

I knew that a "No Grade Plan" would never fly at my public school, where I was required to enter a certain number of grades by a certain time in the semester. So how could I make grading in my own classroom meaningful and reflective of learning?

At a teaching conference in the summer of 2015, I attended a session on standards-based grading, and the first seed was planted. The expectation that students should have a "Bill of Rights" in regard to grading was an idea that I picked up from this session. I took some time to think about my own teaching philosophy and drafted my own "Student Bill of Rights," which included the following three principles:

1. Grades should be an objective reflection of what a student actually knows and can demonstrate, not a reflection of behavioral, personal, or socioeconomic characteristics.
2. Grade reporting should communicate useful information. Grades should be a record of an individual's academic strengths and weaknesses, able to be used for improvement.
3. Mistakes are an opportunity to learn, and everyone learns at different paces and in different ways. Students should therefore be allowed multiple opportunities to practice and demonstrate learning of clearly communicated learning objectives.

From there, I thought about what this could look like in my classroom and began the work of drafting learning objectives for each unit. In later years, these learning objectives morphed from "I can" statements into questions that students were

prompted to answer at the end of a lesson. Every single task, assignment, and assessment clearly communicated the learning goal at the top so that students understood the assignment's purpose.

I stopped grading homework and classwork entirely, which I described to students as "practice" toward mastering each learning goal. Grades were calculated based only on summative assessments completed in class, which varied in format but were all designed to be an objective, individual demonstration of what students understood regarding that one particular learning goal. On practice problems (no longer referred to as "homework" or "classwork"), I gave detailed feedback so that learners could improve. But these problems were not graded.

In my online gradebook, I stopped categorizing assignments as "Homework #1" or "Quiz #5" and instead began writing out the learning goal in its entirety as the header. Students received one grade per learning goal, a grade that came from their performance on the summative assessment. In this way, my printed grade reports became a list of what each student did and did not understand. A student could clearly see that he had an *A* on "How do I balance chemical equations?" but a failing grade on "How can I calculate the reactants or products based on mole ratios?"

But a failing grade for any learning goal was not permanent. It didn't seem fair to me to say, "Hey, you all must know how to calculate reactants and products based on mole ratio by Friday, March 15th, 2019, at 10:30 a.m." I encouraged students to learn from the mistakes that they made and retake summative assessments. I made multiple versions of assessments for each learning goal. If a student showed me that she understood a concept at a later date (that is, up until my principal told me that my grades were due), then I wanted the gradebook to reflect that.

This transition wasn't easy. It took time to articulate the objectives, align materials for each, and create multiple versions of each assessment. I then had to grade the assessments and reassessments. But that time was worth it in light of the changes I began to see in my students' attitudes.

Learning became less about the grade and more about the learning goals. The question, "What can I do to boost my grade?" became, for instance, "Ms. Vanhala, I still don't understand mole ratios. Can we meet after school to go over my mistakes on this assessment? And then I'll review and schedule a retake for next week." Students were able to see explicitly how their grades connected to what they knew (or didn't know), and they weren't permanently penalized for a mistake, be it academic or social. A value was placed on learning from mistakes.

While the initial transition took a lot of work, having a grading policy that finally aligned with my educational philosophy was refreshing. After the framework was in place for one unit, modifying, adjusting, and building on the foundation became easier. I now spend less time on grading, but the feedback that students receive is more meaningful. As a young teacher who had already been feeling burned out on grading, I feel that this new method will be more sustainable in the long term.

It's not a perfect system. The creation and modification of assessments that are valid, reliable, and multidimensional rather than just multiple choice is a work-in-progress that never feels 100 percent "done." I also wonder about how well this system prepares my students for college classes, some of which may be graded in a more traditional manner. But I would rather students leave my class at the end of the semester having learned and retained a solid foundation of content than with a belated understanding of the importance of deadlines. The growth mindset and persistence I've seen in my students show that, although my grading system may still be in development, the work to emphasize learning and make grading meaningful is worthwhile.

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