

# Empowering Students by Demystifying Grading

*Joe Feldman and Tanji Reed Marshall*

**Giving students more insight into performance expectations increases their learning agency.**

The power that teachers have is rarely discussed outside the realm of political engagement. Such engagement usually entails protesting working conditions (think North Carolina teachers' Red For Ed movement), striking for higher salaries, or joining forces to ensure political candidates pay attention to key education issues. But teachers also have immense "instructional power" over their teaching and their students' learning. Amid growing calls to encourage and value student voice and to increase student agency, educators must recognize and be willing to discuss the relationship, even the tension, between their own instructional power and the student's agentive power. We can't discuss the importance of student empowerment without discussing where this tension is most taut: in the area of grading.

We are former K–12 teachers now working within education reform and consulting groups, and we've listened to and supported hundreds of teachers in our work. We define teacher instructional power as the authority to make and implement decisions related to teaching and learning. Although many teachers hold to the idea that they have limited instructional power due to curricular and instructional constraints, all teachers actually exercise a significant measure of instructional power as they orchestrate the dynamics of student learning and make decisions that go beyond the mandates of their districts and states. In traditional classrooms, power is highly concentrated in the teacher. He or she decides what is taught, how it is taught (and usually how students must learn)—and, state-mandated assessment aside, how students will be assessed. A teacher's decisions become the lived experiences of her students' education.

Grading—the criteria by which student performance is evaluated—represents a teacher's most formalized, public, and enduring demonstration of her instructional power. Schools, colleges, and other institutions depend on grades to be an accurate and nonbiased reflection of student academic performance. Unfortunately, grading is often the "third rail" of teaching. It powers major decisions, yet we resist "touching it" and rarely discuss it openly.

## Power-Laden Decisions

While many education scholars and practitioners advocate for teachers sharing power with students in curricular and instructional decisions through choice or co-construction of content,<sup>1</sup> few would suggest teachers should abdicate to students the responsibility for grading. Herein, however, lies a critical question and challenge: If we are committed to investing students with power in their learning, are we similarly willing to give students more ownership over the evaluation of that learning?

So far, most educators haven't been. We might encourage students to raise their voices in relation to school functions, clubs, and other seemingly less rigorous elements of teaching and learning. And most of us say we want students to raise their voice in various ways about how they learn—by, say, managing choices of who they partner with or how they bring their creativity to a poster or presentation. We may even support students' influencing and, in some cases, driving the curriculum through allowing them to choose the books they read or apply content learning to their own lives and communities.

But we teachers and leaders tend to be more hesitant to pull back the veil on the learning process and give students agency regarding the most important and power-laden decisions teachers make, those that are often most hidden from students: how we grade them. Yet when teachers make grades more transparent and explicit, thereby sharing the power to judge and evaluate, not only do students feel more agency and become more invested in their learning, but our classrooms also become more equitable.

## The Equity Connection

Consider the traditional teacher's role in evaluation, especially summative evaluation. The teacher envisions what constitutes understanding of course content and then designs an assessment. Students complete the assessment, and the teacher scores it and calculates a final grade, which presumably correlates with the teacher's conceived gradations of student understanding. The teacher is positioned as the only expert, the only one with the information and authority to determine the quality of a student's performance. Students are beholden to the "omniscient" teacher's judgment and become dependent on it. Teachers must repeatedly answer kids' questions of "Is this good enough?" and "How did I do?" because no one else in the classroom has either the knowledge or the power to make this determination.

This is a paradigm in need of change. How we respond to questions about grading and power is especially crucial for students who generally enter schools already having less power: students of color, students from families experiencing poverty, and students with disabilities. Because the teacher is the only one who judges performance, grading can, and often does, inadvertently undermine equity and perpetuate academic opportunity gaps. Students with parents who were successful in school or have higher income are more likely to have access to academic guidance about what teachers "want"—for instance, what an *A* essay or a "good" project looks like. In this way, the opacity of traditional grading can perpetuate achievement disparities.

Teachers often rely on a hidden value system of what constitutes success and may not make their ideas explicitly known to students, which further exacerbates the opportunity gaps many students face. Additionally, teachers often hold students to varying expectations related to demographic indicators.<sup>2</sup> This tendency negatively impacts outcomes for students of color, students with disabilities, and students whose families experience poverty.

## Transparency in the Classroom

In this traditional evaluation role, teachers often overlook opportunities to exercise our instructional power and make the evaluation criteria accessible to students in ways that equip and empower *them* to use that information to be successful. What if the knowledge of what constitutes understanding wasn't only in the teacher's head, hidden from students, but was transparent and explicit? Fortunately—as the following examples we've observed in our work with schools reflect—many teachers are discovering that by lifting the veil on their performance expectations, the power of grading becomes shared throughout the classroom. Such knowledge sharing offers students a window into a world which many have been essentially locked out of. It increases their power over their own learning.

Rubrics and proficiency scales, which describe the different gradations of performance, are two ways in which the teacher can lift the veil on grading. A rubric describes how a piece of work or a performance will be evaluated—the specific criteria as well as what constitutes distinctive gradations of quality for every criterion. Zora, a high school student, perfectly captures this idea, saying "A rubric is almost like an instruction manual."

In contrast to a rubric, which is usually specific to a particular assignment or performance, a proficiency scale describes gradations of mastery of a wider area of content. For example, in a unit on American history, a teacher could describe exactly what a student would need to know to demonstrate an *A* level of content knowledge (for which a student shows he can demonstrate advanced application or analysis of the content), a *B* level (good understanding, but not advanced), or a *C* level (in which a student shows common misconceptions or knowledge gaps).

Joanna, a middle school math teacher, shares a proficiency scale with students each time she begins a new unit. Throughout the unit, she often refers to that scale and the different levels of mastery by which students will be evaluated on the whole unit. In fact, she even includes the scale on the quizzes and summative tests. By lifting the veil on her curricular goals and performance expectations, Joanna equips students to self-assess their progress and enlists them to self-identify learning gaps. Without that transparency, many students would be left in the dark or hoping for the best about the quality of their performance; the grade could be a surprise. "Students like knowing the standard and where they are on that standard," says Joanna. "I love the growth mindset idea, and this is all about that."

Joanna has found that the transparency of expectations has transformed the discourse of her classroom—what learning means, how it is described, and what demonstrates mastery. The arrangement has given students the knowledge to

evaluate themselves. Rather than being dependent on her to determine the quality of their performance, they have become empowered to see themselves on a trajectory of learning, with clear descriptions of each step along that path.

## Democratizing Classroom Power

Rubrics and proficiency scales also make the classroom more equitable. Ordinarily, the traditional approach to evaluation privileges students with more "school knowledge capital," who can better read the signals of the teacher, or whose caregivers have a stronger educational background. Creating rubrics and proficiency scales forces educators to move beyond applying a "knowing it when we see it" definition of competence, and instead to articulate that definition, democratizing power by giving everyone the same information. We might even think of rubrics and proficiency scales as installing a checks and balances system in our classroom.

We've seen students use rubrics as an advocacy tool to ensure a teacher's consistent evaluation. Sahar, a high school student, explains that "My teacher will grade off the rubric, so you know what to expect when you take that test and write that essay. ... It holds everyone more accountable. It helps everyone get graded equally."

By explicitly describing what it means for students to succeed, educators create a safeguard that can prevent us from inadvertently bringing biased assumptions or hidden expectations to our evaluations. Everyone—whether students or the teacher—uses the same criteria to judge performance, and everyone in the class is held equally accountable to those criteria. This is the type of empowerment all students deserve.

As Damian, a high school student, explains:

I like rubrics. They hold the teachers accountable because both the student knows what the teacher wants and the teacher has to actually think about how they're going to grade something. Instead of just throwing an assignment out and saying, "Do this today," I feel like the teacher puts more effort in on grading the assignment, so there's more effort from both sides.

## Everyone Gains

Empowering students by lifting the grading veil can have profound long-term impact on our students, particularly those most vulnerable. When we normalize rubrics and proficiency scales, students understand that those who evaluate them have clear expectations. These tools give students the information and agency to make critical decisions about their work. We are training them to advocate for transparency, to ask what specifically is expected of them in order to get an A on the college project, to earn an outstanding performance evaluation by an employer, or to receive the scholarship. The goal is to empower students with the mechanisms to expect, request, and perhaps—rightly—to demand that the hidden become transparent.

Our instructional authority isn't lost when we empower students. Power for learning isn't a zero-sum game—even when it relates to the most consequential decisions of grading. While teachers should always be the final authority on assigning student grades, they aren't losing power when they lift the veil and give students the information they need. They are *creating* power by transforming students from passive recipients of grades to informed and invested co-evaluators of their work. Using rubrics and proficiency scales is not just another strategy for our toolbox. It's a way to recognize and demonstrate a profound respect for students' intellect—enough respect to make what is hidden, visible.

*Author's Note:* All student and teacher names are pseudonyms.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Oakes, J., Lipton, M., Anderson, L., & Stillman, J. (2018). *Teaching to change the world*, 5th Ed. New York: Routledge.

<sup>2</sup> The New Teacher Project. (2018). *The opportunity myth*. New York: Author.

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