Why Grades Are Not Paramount to Achievement

The intrinsic love of learning supplants the drive for high marks in the long run.

[**Ashley Lamb-Sinclair**](safari-reader://www.theatlantic.com/author/ashley-lamb-sinclair/)

Jun 16, 2017

At the beginning of this school year, my colleagues and I decided to avoid giving the sophomores in our English classes any grades for six weeks. Research [shows](https://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/RR-08-30.pdf) that providing students with a number or letter in addition to quality comments prevents them from authentically reflecting. Quantitative grades also [diminish](http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/nov11/vol69/num03/The-Case-Against-Grades.aspx) student interest in learning, reduce academic risk taking, and decrease the quality of thinking. But beyond academics, as teachers, we saw the negative impact grades made on our students’ mental and emotional health. In fact, though a bit outdated, a 2002 study conducted by a psychologist at the University of Michigan showed 80 percent of students based their self worth on their academic success, [leading to](http://www.apa.org/monitor/dec02/selfesteem.aspx) low self-esteem and other mental-health issues. In a highly academic setting, here was an opportunity to catalyze our students’ broader motivations for learning—a quality with macro-benefits in an environment obsessed with single Scantron marks.

Ours is the type of school that when I input grades into our electronic gradebook system, it is usually a matter of minutes before students knock on my classroom door and parents send me emails questioning single points and marks. It is frustrating for me to have the work I do distilled down to a data point, so I was excited to try something new without the pressures of the gradebook. Our principal approved the plan and we sent a letter to families explaining the research and our reasoning for withholding grades. I also set up a closed Facebook group where I shared daily images, and I instituted weekly emails to keep parents abreast of the learning process.

All was mostly well during those six weeks, and I found my students to be incredibly engaged. At one point, we spent three days on a single thesis statement alone—students writing their claims, discussing them without fear of negative retribution in the form of a grade, and then redoing them happily. Before, such a lengthy lesson would have been met with endless questions about how many points it was worth, and if the teenage math didn’t add up for them—if the cost outweighed the benefits—I would have been forced to increase the points to improve motivation or move on more quickly than they needed. In this situation, however, everything was low risk for the students, so they approached assignments more positively. And because grades were irrelevant, the challenge of the assignment took precedence.

If a student wasn’t meeting expectations or turning in assignments, I discussed my concerns with them and their parents within a day. Many parents seemed to appreciate this quick, frequent contact, and several contacted me regularly for updates. I wasn’t overwhelmed with this level of contact, although I might have been in the past, because I didn’t have to worry about converting standards to point values and inputting them into the grade book. Typically, my assessment process takes anywhere from a week to a couple of months, and the pressure along the way from students, parents, and administrators often shifts my focus away from learning and toward frequent inputting of grades. But when grades were put on the back burner, I was freed up to focus on authentic communication of actual learning and growth. My sole focus became the learning of each student and sharing my observations of that learning in the moment. It felt like a revelation.

But then the time came to actually start grading. Parents who had been thrilled with consistent contact and specific feedback only weeks before suddenly seemed perplexed as to why their child’s grades were not 100 percent all the time. I was soon spending significant time on the phone, responding to emails, and sitting down to conference with parents who complained about a lack of communication. Ironically, my contact with parents was the most intensive it had ever been in 12 years of teaching.

Now, obviously, I am not perfect. With any of these interactions, I very possibly could have been more communicative. But it was so baffling to me to see that in the eyes of a parent, a numerical evaluation was more informative and meaningful than frequent written and spoken descriptions. As the dust settled and we moved further into the school year, it occurred to me that perhaps this was because the product of learning is often more comfortable and affirming than the process of it. Consider that having a degree is often validating regardless of actual skills, and a test score could never illustrate the hours spent studying to achieve it. A willingness to learn for its own sake [represents](http://ejop.psychopen.eu/article/view/638/html) intrinsic motivation, while grades and other accolades represent extrinsic. Research [has shown](https://www.edutopia.org/discussion/difference-between-intrinsic-extrinsic-motivation-it-pertains-learning) time and again that intrinsic motivation leads to more profound learning. The truth is that the willingness to learn leads to achievement, but so often achievement is the only part that matters to others.

The problem lies when the product itself is elevated above the process.

It is difficult to ignore the realities of grades and their extrinsic power. As frustrated as I was with the parents who wanted conferences or who argued over a point or two, I understand their frustration. They wanted what was best for their child which includes a quality college education and well-paying career. Test scores and grades certainly matter in the current academic system for achieving these goals. But while some employers do [still look](https://www.forbes.com/forbes/welcome/?toURL=https://www.forbes.com/sites/susanadams/2013/12/06/do-employers-really-care-about-your-college-grades/&refURL=&referrer=#3b01442b51e1) for higher GPAs for recent college graduates, most are [more concerned](https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/08/the-thing-employers-look-for-when-hiring-recent-graduates/378693/) with relevant internship, job, and volunteer experience. And extrinsic motivation [is often](http://www.bucknell.edu/communications/bucknell-magazine/instant-gratification-and-its-dark-side.html) effective when it is immediate, so graduating from high school and college with higher grades actually [represents](http://money.usnews.com/money/blogs/outside-voices-careers/articles/2016-04-26/does-gpa-matter-when-applying-for-a-job) intrinsic motivation and persistence. So while the grades and scores matter as a quick reference for admissions officers and employers, they actually represent something more profound in the type of learner and worker in which they plan to invest.

Many professionals, including teachers, seek achievements to prove their value just as students do. Receiving National Board certification is often considered the gold standard in achievement for teachers. I have rarely encountered a National Board-certified teacher who was not a quality educator, and principals are consistently impressed when they learn I have the accolade. The value of the certification, though, comes from the process of earning it, not the framed certificate on the wall. Becoming National Board-certified is intensive and challenging. The extrinsic motivation of higher pay, more opportunities, and elevated status might have initially led me to seek National Board certification, but my dedication to improving as a professional guided me through the sometimes grueling process. I remember watching a video of myself teaching, stopping it minute-by-minute, and recording what was going on in the classroom in that instance. In the day-to-day whirlwind of managing student behavior, lesson plans, and grades, I don’t have the luxury of such reflection and analysis.

When my students spent three days on a single thesis statement, they practiced similar intensive reflection to when I was working toward becoming National Board-certified. And for both my students and for me, such opportunities are rare. So while parents might see a 96 percent in the gradebook and feel comforted by such a number, many don’t actually know the work that led to it. The problem lies when the product itself is elevated above the process, and questions of improving revolve around getting an A and not mastering skills.

Even for students who are highly motivated by grades and test scores, I have seen the ugly side of this behavior. But during the six-week period when my students were freed from the pressures of grades and instead focused on being learners, engagement, enthusiasm, motivation, and determination drastically [increased](http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2013/05/the_case_against_grades_they_lower_self_esteem_discourage_creativity_and.html). If only I could have measured those skills and shown them to my students’ parents in a way that resonated with them.

But one parent in particular did respond positively—my principal. His daughter was in my class. Near the end of the six-week period, he sent me an email and wrote in it,

“I love the fact that you were willing to try something that to the outside world looked odd and probably drew dozens of ‘That’s not the way it was done when I was in school’ types of comments at dinner tables over the last month or so...Thank you, Ashley, for taking risks and putting your students’ learning above everything else.”

I appreciated that he realized what I was trying to do, but more than that, I appreciated that he understood why. He knew this because he is a parent and an educator. As both myself, what I want for my children is a love of learning, a driving passion for being better at something that matters to them, and educators who know the power of such desire as well.

When I was in high school, I took AP Chemistry II, a class I had no business taking because I was deeply unqualified and too immature to do so. I didn’t care about learning high-level chemistry, and I was not the kind of student who was ever motivated by grades. So pretty early into the school year, I knew I was going to fail. The teacher was challenging, but caring and compassionate. I showed up to his class every day, tried to distract my friends—who did care about chemistry and grades—and when that didn’t work, proceeded to put my head down and sleep. I failed the class, but I learned a valuable lesson. I stopped pushing myself to do things that I didn’t believe in, and I focused my energy instead on things I did. To this day, it is the only class I have ever failed, but I wear the grade as a badge of honor. That sense of authentic self-identity guided me through college, graduate school, student teaching, writing resumes, landing jobs I loved, and, yes, eventually achievements of which I am proud.