



The Benefits of Standards-Based Grading: A Critical Evaluation of Modern Grading Practices

Danielle L. Iamarino
Northern Arizona University

This paper explores the methodology and application of an assessment philosophy known as standards-based grading, via a critical comparison of standards-based grading to other assessment philosophies commonly employed at the elementary, secondary, and post-secondary levels of education. Evidenced by examples of increased student engagement and more thorough comprehension of course materials, standards-based grading is illustrated as an effective replacement for conventional points-based grading. The analysis also identifies and responds to common issues and concerns inherent in the application of standards-based grading, and includes a review of relevant literature and research in support of standards-based grading as a progressive and successful alternative to more conventional assessment philosophies.

Keywords: standards-based grading, formative assessment, points-based grading, summative assessment

Standards-based grading, also known as formative assessment, is an innovative and highly controversial grading practice gaining momentum at the elementary, secondary, and post-secondary levels of education. The process is most concisely described as a grading system in which students are evaluated based on their proficiency in meeting a clearly-articulated set of course objectives (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). Standards-based grading is different from points-based grading in that it diverges from the traditional 100-point scale, in which points are allocated to individual assignments, and students earn them as they go (Marzano, 2009). Standards-based grading focuses instead on larger outcomes; rather than inferring a student's progress based solely on how many points the student has accumulated from the completion of individual assignments—or from attendance, which is sometimes scored alongside academic assignments—standards-based grading concerns itself with the cohesive body of knowledge that the student gains as a result of the course. It does so by prioritizing the *final result* of the student's participation,

instead of relying on a summation of grades awarded at various stages of the student's learning process—an intrinsically flawed method of evaluation which often produces a snapshot inconsistent with the true outcome of the student's efforts in the course.

To truly understand the differences between these two grading practices, it must be noted that standards-based (formative) assessment and points-based (summative) assessment serve two different—and often conflicting—purposes. In his book, *How to Grade for Learning, K-12*, Ken O'Connor (2009) identifies the separate purposes of each method, stating,

It is essential that teachers distinguish clearly between formative and summative assessment....Formative assessment should be used primarily to give feedback to students (and teachers) on the progress of learning, whereas summative assessments are used to make judgments about the amount of learning and so are included in grades. (p. 116)

In short, the former focuses on providing students with

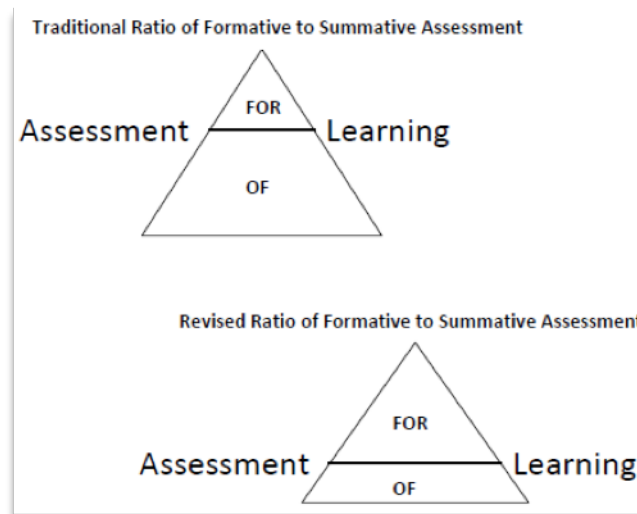


Figure 1. Source: Spokane Public Schools, 2009, p. 14.

feedback, with the expectation of improvement, while the latter is predicated upon judgment of what the student has already managed to achieve. The same concept is illustrated in Figure 1, which depicts the effect of swapping summative for formative assessment; instead of defaulting to previously recorded grades, and calculating a final grade from the resulting accumulation of points, formative grading assesses in the *present tense*, seeking to verify not simply that a student has completed a certain amount of assignments, but that a student is armed with the tools necessary to succeed in future assignments. By emphasizing a student's ability to meet a clear set of standards, typically designed to reflect thorough, end-of-course comprehension of the subjects taught, standards-based grading not only holds students accountable to their progress, but eliminates the discrepancies implicit in attempting to turn point calculations into an accurate representation of a student's achievements. Thusly, a teacher using a standards-based system of evaluation is better able to determine a student's grade based on the single most important aspect of education—how well the student comprehends the content of the course.

Standards-based grading takes aim both at mediocrity in the classroom and inaccurateness in the gradebook, attempting to reinvigorate education by encouraging teachers to implement more accurate methods of evaluation—methods that hold students accountable not for earning points, which often do not represent learning achievements so much as students' ability to follow a set of rules, but for actual mastery of the subjects taught to them. Though applicable to all fields of study, this method of evaluation is particularly relevant to the liberal arts, whose academic objectives

lend themselves less to test scores (points) and more to the general betterment of students' abilities to think and write critically, comprehending and contributing to the world around them in a manner that projects, as the phrase suggests, a measure of "liberation."

An examination of grading systems used within the field of liberal arts, applied to such disciplines as the study English or writing, reveals that standards-based grading is a substantial improvement upon traditional points-based grading, but that it requires of those who use it a keen understanding of its methodology, and a commitment to education that transcends and even defies many current expectations set forth by school administrations. With a general emphasis on liberal arts classes, this report will illustrate the benefits of standards-based grading through a review of relevant literature, research, and—perhaps most centrally—actual grading practices employed at the elementary, secondary, and post-secondary levels of education.

Standards-Based Grading and Overarching Learning Objectives

In order to truly appreciate the deficiencies of points-based grading, we must understand not only the ways in which standards-based grading is superior to points-based grading, but also what characterizes a "superior" education. We must identify overarching goals in education, and evaluate each method of grading based on how well it serves those goals. For the purpose of this discussion, let us identify and reaffirm the objectives of academic, liberal-arts based education.

In the essay, "Statistics in Liberal Arts Education," Iverson (1985) investigates the learning objectives of college-level liberal arts classes, stating that

English, in particular, is taught “because training in English enables us to think more critically and to communicate our thoughts,” and that “similar comments can be made about most subjects taught as part of a liberal arts curriculum” (p. 17). Achievement of objectives such as critical thinking and communication necessitates that students are able to apply what they learn in the limited context of the classroom to what they experience in the greater context of the world, a purpose Iverson (1985) reaffirms when stating that “after acquiring such a background in the liberal arts, a person’s natural next step is to acquire the necessary skills needed for a profession” (p. 17). This task is naturally obscured by points-based grading, in that there is no clear way to apply the acquisition of points to anything other than a gradebook. A better system would make it a priority to clarify for students the practical connections between achievements inside and outside of the classroom.

Numerous researchers support the necessity of establishing such connections, such as college English instructors Hassel and Lourey (2005), who state in their essay, “The Dea(r)th of Student Responsibility,” that “instructors have reason to believe that their students are out of touch with what their grades really symbolize, why they are even in college, and what responsibilities they have as students” (p. 2). Standards-based grading may help close this gap between course curriculum and overarching education and career goals; its formative assessment component engenders a learning environment prime for clarifying the broader implications of coursework, in that it requires instructors to interact more often and more closely with students and their work—to engage students in establishing goals, and then help students apply their work to those goals.

Conversely, points-based grading is preoccupied with numbers, rather than communication. Final grades are sourced from gradebook figures (points), and there is often no comprehensive system in place to determine the integrity of the methods through which those figures are collected. This makes it difficult to determine whether or not the resulting final grades are accurate reflections of student proficiency levels. While an assessment system based on the input and output of figures may appear highly manageable from an administrative standpoint, Finn (1990) highlights the potential for a improved student learning if we, as educators, are willing to step outside of tradition:

When the presumptive link between inputs and outputs snaps, it also becomes possible to think of education (as we commonly think of most other enterprises) in terms of productivity and efficiency. These concepts make sense only when you recognize that dividends do not necessarily follow from investments—nor learning from teaching—in predictable and uniform ways. (p. 589)

By reframing education as an enterprise, Finn (1990) encourages us to teach and grade for long-term productivity, rather than short-term numbers and grades. The success of this philosophy hinges, in no small part, upon whether or not students are able to grasp the practical application of what they are learning. Under a standards-based system, teachers are encouraged to provide detailed and meaningful assessments of student material, thusly affording both student and teacher a chance to work together to demystify learning objectives and establish critical connections.

In addition to helping repurpose education as a fundamental step toward a career, the critical connections students make between course material and long-term goals will serve their ability to understand the world around them in more multidimensional, comprehensive terms. Iverson (1985) further aligns the study of liberal arts with “higher ideals of human life,” and identifies the content of a well-rounded liberal arts education as “less a list of subjects and more a general learning process that develops a person and makes that person an active, contributing member of society” (p. 17). Given this description, the overarching aim of liberal arts education is to grow and refine students’ capacity for learning, providing them with a base of knowledge by which they might acquire a better understanding of themselves, their peers, and—as previously mentioned—the world beyond the classroom. Moreover, the above description makes clear that providing students with an exemplary liberal arts education does not default to rote instruction of itemized “subjects,” but requires the facilitation of an active and evolving process by which students learn to navigate the intricacies of the society toward which they aspire.

Additionally, let us consider the phrase “higher ideals of human life”; it conjures, in particular, ideas of self-worth and empathy, placing implicit value on the critical, moral and social development of the human mind. For a number of reasons, achievements or deficiencies in such categories cannot responsibly be qualified by an amount (or lack) of points. In order to accurately identify and respond to accomplishments and impediments in a learning process that emphasizes such broad goals as cognitive development, individualized attention must be given to the student in question. His or her particular situation must be acknowledged and dealt with by a teacher who understands the importance of clarifying the larger implications of the student’s progress, lest that student lose sight of the relevance of continuing to make said progress. An individual grade of 99 out of 100 points will almost certainly fail to reinforce overarching learning objectives as well as a written page of evaluative response, or a personal conference detailing what exactly the student did so well. Similarly, if a teacher hands a student a failing assignment, that student will not know where the need for improvement originates unless the

teacher makes an effort to explain the grade, providing the student not only with a clear set of standards to meet, but a plan for meeting that set of standards.

Communication Patterns in Classroom Assessment

O'Connor (2009) reinforces that language, rather than numbers, should be the central tenet in student-teacher communications: "The basic principle at work [in standards-based grading] is that words open up communication, whereas numbers close it down—prematurely at that" (p. 123). Premature conclusion of student-teacher dialogues creates gaps in the learning process, making it especially vulnerable to impediment; given that it is the nature of the learning process (and any other process, for that matter), to exist in a constant state of flux, absorbing the features of its environment, it is essential that teachers catch and correct problems before they are manifest. Progress must be monitored outside the parameters of points-assignment, in order that deficiencies and successes are not overlooked, having been inaccurately transfigured by numbers in a gradebook.

Teachers cannot achieve this without transcending the comfortable distances of entering points into a gradebook, into the sometimes uncomfortable realm of communicating with students directly and often about the particulars of their academic progress. Expectedly, there is some resistance to this transition. Finn (1990) comments on a central tension surrounding the change:

There is, to be sure, some self-interest evident both in educators' devotion to an input-based conception of the enterprise that employs them and in their resistance to paying the consequences for poor results. In this sense, the old paradigm is manifestly more comfortable and less demanding than the new. (p. 590)

This is, overwhelmingly, an understandable impasse. For teachers, one of the most intimidating aspects of the "new" paradigm, in which communication is prioritized as a necessary component of academic progress, is its tendency to unmask previously unidentified problems—to throw a wrench in what we had previously understood to be a well-oiled machine. For example, consider the following situation high school English teachers, Frey and Fisher (2013), encountered during their transition to standards-based assessment:

[We] began providing students more detailed feedback about their progress. The shift to focusing on their drafts created a new problem, as it became apparent that we were seeing emerging problems between what we thought we were teaching and how our students were interpreting the content. (p. 67-68)

Fortunately, this is not an insurmountable issue. In the classroom, the key to making the right information stick is to catch and correct problems *as* they occur, rather than responding to them at a later point, *after* grades have been

issued and students are less incentivized to better their work. Finn (1990) suggests that once we begin to define education in terms of actual knowledge gained, we will have an easier time "working backward from what is or isn't learned," and correcting gaps in students' comprehension of the material (p. 590).

Error Margins and Discordant Outcomes in Conventional Grading

Close examinations of classes in which exclusively point-based grading systems are used tend to reveal notable discord between intended and actual learning outcomes; despite that the addition and subtraction of points is meant to reward or penalize students for the quality of their performance in a class, theoretically making them more accountable to their academic responsibilities, reports suggest that points-based grading is actually having an adverse effect on students' motivation to improve their understanding of subject matter. In an attempt to shed light on this issue, Frey and Fisher (2013) embarked on a study aimed at providing educators with an answer to the question, "Does the grading we do pay off in terms of improved student understanding of writing?" (p. 66). The following results are from a survey they conducted on English students at their high school, who were accustomed to being evaluated in the context of a points-based, or summative grading system. The survey asked them what they valued most insofar as feedback on their writing assignments. The results are as follows:

Of the nearly 550 high school students who responded to the question about feedback on end-of-unit extended writing tasks, over 80 percent of them selected [that they wanted] "To know what grade I got and generally how I did." They were not as interested in "Edits to improve my writing" (3 percent), "Information about my understanding of the content" (12 percent), or "Specific and detailed information about my performance" (4 percent). (Frey & Fisher, 2013, p. 66)

These results highlight the overarching inefficiency of the current grading system (it does not encourage a continuum of improvement) and also lend some definition to a particular problem: that students are losing nearly all interest in improving work once final grades have been calculated. Frey and Fisher (2013) note the practical effect of this trend, stating that although students typically comply with teachers' specific revision suggestions, "in too many cases, there is no evidence of any advancement in learning. The student made all of the corrections we requested, only to make the same mistakes again on the next essay" (p. 66).

This is due in part to the fact that points, in addition to distracting students from ongoing learning objectives, are also prone to masking (or inappropriately compensating) for learning deficiencies, making it

difficult both for students to engage with course material, and for teachers to identify and meet student needs. In the following excerpt from her article, “Seven Reasons for Standards-Based Grading,” high school teacher Scriffiny (2008) attests to how points-based grades can mask actual levels of comprehension, obscuring the learning process:

I once thought it was essential to award points to students simply for completing homework. I didn't believe students would do homework unless it was graded. And yet, students who were clearly learning sometimes earned low grades because of missing work. Conversely, some students actually learned very little, but were good at “playing school.” Despite dismal test scores, these students earned decent grades by turning in homework and doing extra credit. (p. 71)

Scriffiny's (2008) testament raises several key problems associated with points-based grading, the first being that awarding points “simply for completing homework” risks sending the wrong message to students: that they can be successful without improving the quality of their work, if only they complete it and turn it in on time. Such a system not only prioritizes the acquisition of points more than it does the comprehension of material, but it also suggests to the students that the constancy of their work is more important than the quality of their work. As Martell (1974) explains, “Predictability in academic performance is rewarded. What then do we have? A social institution that has substituted means for ends. Grades are paramount, and education is only secondary” (p. 113). When students are awarded points for meeting the basic expectation of turning assignments in on a regular basis—even if the work being turned in does *not* reflect actual completion of learning objectives—these students may forget that the learning objectives even exist, focusing instead on meeting the rote requirements of a system that is guaranteed to issue points in exchange for compliance.

The second problem is that in an environment that prioritizes points, students are often quick to identify and isolate the quickest methods of attaining those points, regardless of whether or not the activities they complete to get them are actually beneficial to the learning process. This has the practical effect of replacing cognitive learning goals with the acquisition of points, as an assignment completed chiefly for the purpose of attaining points is an assignment lost to all broader course objectives. This is alienating to the student in that it separates successful grades from successful learning, and alienating to the teacher in that it fails to provide a truly accurate representation of how successful his or her teaching methods are.

An additional problem is that relying exclusively upon points to report student progress allows for the development of inaccurate trends in the gradebook. Sadler

(2005) helps us better understand the margin of error inherent in an exclusively points-based system:

Using numerical ranges gives the impression of definiteness and precision and the system is easy to make operational, but the grade cut-off scores are not usually linked directly to mastery of specific subject matter or skills. . . . The obvious measurement issue raised by this policy is how the marks are generated in the first place. Validity, sampling adequacy, item quality, marking standards, marking reliability and measurement error generally are all significant variables that produce an underlying softness in the basic data that typically goes unrecognized. (p. 182)

If we accept Sadler's (2005) claim of “softness” in the data upon which numerical grades are predicated, we must also accept that grades issued under a point-based system may reflect inaccurate data. Consider, for example, the following situation, entirely possible under the kind of point-based system referenced by both Scriffiny (2008) and Sadler (2005): *Student A* has a higher homework average than her peers, due to consistently completing and turning in homework assignments, but her quiz and tests scores are substantially lower than her peers, suggesting that she lacks fundamental comprehension of course material. Conversely, *Student B* has a low homework average, but her test scores reflect that she comprehends the material. Despite this, *Student A's* earned points will amount to more than *Student B's*, resulting in a higher final grade.

Any grading-system that allows for this kind of contradiction has failed the test of integrity. If a grading system is unable to determine a failed from a successful learning objective, it is in need of substantial and immediate revision.

Unfortunately, while providers of elementary and secondary education, such as Scriffiny (2008), Frey and Fisher (2013), are making strides in the promotion of standards-based grading, likeminded post-secondary educators may face larger roadblocks in the fight for more accurate assessments. Hassel and Lourey (2005) discuss a disturbing trend in post-secondary assessments:

At Harvard, about half of all course grades already are A or A-, and, as Dan Seligman notes, ‘91% of seniors graduated with honors’ (2002, p. 94). If the direction that grades are taking at Harvard—the oldest institution of higher learning in the United States and the ‘jewel’ of American higher education—is any indication, the future of evaluation and assessment in university classrooms is bleak. (p. 4)

So, why is Harvard, whose name is synonymous with high standards, issuing high grades in such plentiful

quantities? Hassel and Lourey (2005) suggest that the kind of “grade inflation” exhibited here is the result of a “consumer model of academia,” in which students have come to expect a high grade that is concurrent with their high tuition rates (p. 4). This unrealistic expectation has been allowed to manifest in higher education, due in part to universities’ interests in maintaining student enrollment. “[Grade] inflation,” as Hassel and Lourey (2005) go on to state, “is a direct consequence of seeing students as customers entitled to a product (credits) that they have paid for, rather than as apprentices, and the result is a weakening of standards and a skewing of instructor and student accountability” (p. 4). A standards-based system, in which grades are in direct correlation to learning objectives, would make it more difficult for universities to acquiesce students’ undue expectations of high grades.

Grade Distortion and the Reporting of Nonacademic Progress

Standards-based grading provides the teacher with an opportunity to repurpose existing activities and assignments so that they better reinforce learning objectives, and does so in part by eliminating distractions. Conventions that are clearly disconnected from broader goals, and that dilute the learning experience—such as point-incentives for basic classroom requirements such as attendance—are subtracted from the learning environment, clearing the way for more academic standards to be met. Exemplifying this methodology at the elementary and secondary levels is the district known as Spokane Public Schools (SPS), which now restricts all grading criteria to categories that are directly relevant to academic success. SPS explains, in a purpose statement orienting teachers unfamiliar with the standards-based system, that “when we include things like effort, participation, or adherence to school rules in grades, grades are essentially broken” (2009, p. 4). This statement highlights that if grades are indeed meant to reflect *academic* progress, academic standards must be the only standards upon which the grades are based.

There is a complication, however, in adapting this system at the elementary and secondary levels of education; a parental and societal expectation exists that schools monitor and encourage adolescents’ social and work habits in conjunction with their academic progress. Anticipating this concern, SPS (2009) recommends that teachers continue monitoring students’ nonacademic development, but that they report it separately from students’ grades, in a manner that does not interfere with academic assessments.

To do so, teachers must first understand how to treat nonacademic and academic developments as two separate categories of progress. Effectively differentiating between these two categories necessitates a standards-based system, in which work habits and social development are each assigned their own set of criteria,

and a student’s progress in achieving these criteria is reported according to certain levels of satisfaction.

It is also important to note that separating nonacademic from academic information is not a matter of altering the methods by which each set of data is gathered. Regardless of an assessment’s focus, healthy communication between student and teacher remains essential, and can be encouraged in a variety of ways; in particular, the National Council for Teachers of English suggests conducting surveys, interviews, or conferences with students as means of gathering, processing and discussing all manner of necessary information (*Formative Assessment*, 2013). The concern, rather, is in the *reporting* of each category; in keeping with the goal of preventing nonacademic information from distorting students’ grades, information not directly relevant to grades may be conveyed to students, parents and administrators via narrative evaluation, in a document that does not intersect at any point with the reporting of strictly academic developments. This is a clean, effective way for elementary and secondary school teachers to continue reporting important nonacademic developments without skewing academic standards, and consequently distorting academic grades.

Evaluation Criteria in a Standards-Based System

SPS (2009) also acknowledges that in order to successfully operate and maintain a standards-based grading system, there must exist an exceptionally clear model of criteria by which to evaluate students’ academic advancements within that system. Attention to criteria, after all, is what separates standards-based grading from other forms of grading; criteria are what help teachers determine whether or not standards are being met. Because there is often no practical definition or application of statewide academic standards, which tend to be unduly reliant upon points-based test scores, many forward-thinking districts and institutions find themselves in the position of needing to establish and implement: first, their own set of standards, and second, their own criteria by which to measure how well their students achieve those standards. SPS and other likeminded education providers take noteworthy initiative in forging their own district- or institution-wide standards and criteria.

Figure 2, excerpted from SPS’ grading handbook, illustrates a model set of standards. Academic proficiency is broken down into four different levels, reflecting standards of achievement at various stages of the learning process. The headings corresponding to each level—“Beginning,” “Approaching,” “Meeting,” and “Above”—refer to a student’s progress in relation to the end-of-course standard, which is described in Level 3 (“Meeting”). The availability of such a rubric lends essential clarity to the process of standards-based grading.

The absence of a widely-implemented set of grading criteria, such as the one shown in Figure 2, can

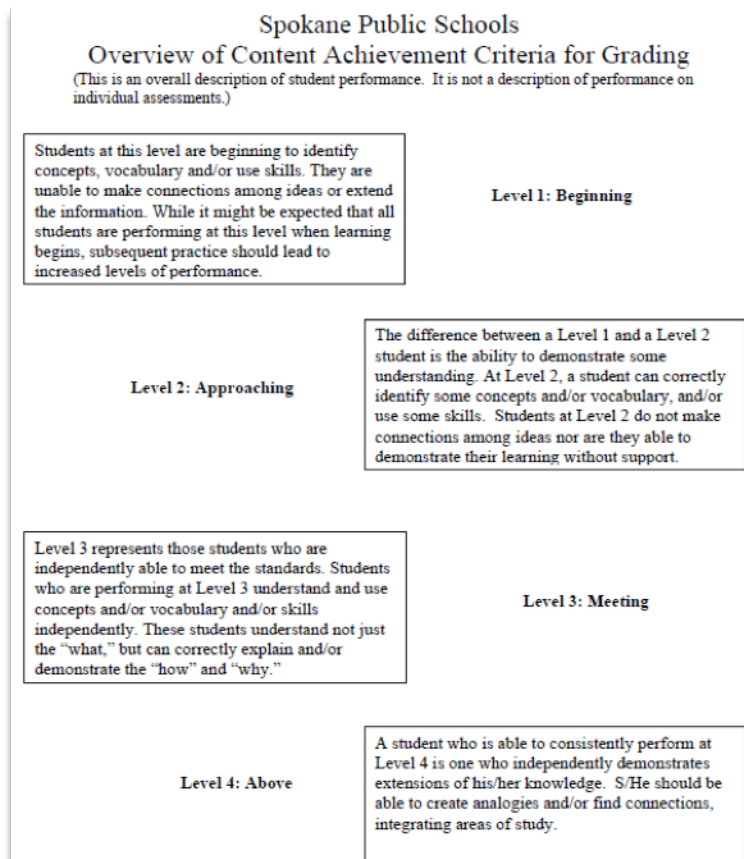


Figure 2. Source: Spokane Public Schools, 2009, p. 9.

lead to serious inconsistencies in the way individual teachers within an institution or district evaluate and grade their students. Marzano and Kendall (1996) warn that inconsistency in grading standards can engender “a situation in which grades given by one teacher might mean something entirely different from grades given by another teacher even though the teachers are presiding over two identical classes”—a discrepancy undesirable in any education system that strives to cultivate the same levels of academic success in each member of its student body (p. 10). Such discrepancies only result when, in the absence of a universal set of standards, teachers *improvise* by creating their own grading criteria; one teacher might prioritize attendance and classroom participation, while another is more concerned with quality of homework. Each teacher places more importance—typically expressed in amounts of available points—on his or her preferred category, and grades accordingly. Such individually crafted standards disservice students in that they are applicable only in the limited context of that particular teacher’s class. In the eyes of the student, the

purposes of these standards may be a complete mystery outside of the teacher’s classroom.

Mysteries in the evaluation rubric, resulting in questionable grading practices, critically disadvantage any student, parent, administrator, or government representative attempting to navigate the education system. In the book, *Making Standards Work: How to Implement Standards-Based Assessments in the Classroom*, Reeves (2004) discusses this issue:

Whether Congress and state legislatures are analyzing the performance of millions of students or a third-grade teacher is evaluating the work of a single child, the principle of fairness demands that the definition of success be clear. Student achievement in a fair system stems from meeting a standard rather than wading through mysterious and changing expectations. (p. xiv)

The operative word in the above passage is “fair.” Attempting to facilitate a class in the absence of standards and criteria is tantamount to professional recklessness. Variant evaluation criteria not only confuse and hinder

students, but also impede any attempt to determine the strengths and weaknesses of a student body as a whole, as they allow no reliable frame of reference by which to evaluate success.

Standards-Based Grading and Teacher Performance

An education system lacking in concrete evaluation criteria is a danger to teachers as well; like students, they too suffer the anxieties of being evaluated absent a reliable frame of reference. While monitoring teacher performance and holding teachers accountable to their shortcomings are essential aspects of education reform, attempting to do so when the standards of success have not yet been comprehensively clarified may cause levels of confusion and stress in teachers that ultimately lead to decreased productivity. Ball (2003) elaborates:

The teacher, researcher, academic are subject to a myriad of judgments, measures, comparisons and targets... Within all this, there is a high degree of uncertainty and instability. A sense of being constantly judged in different ways, by different means, according to different criteria... We become ontologically insecure: unsure whether we are doing enough, doing the right thing, doing as much as other... And yet it is not always very clear what is expected. (p. 220)

Thus, a clear set of standards is necessary in guiding both students and teachers toward desirable education outcomes. In his essay, "The Two Purposes of Teacher Evaluation," Marzano (2012) promotes a teacher evaluation system based on a scale similar to that of SBSs student evaluation system (see Figure 2). Marzano (2012) states that a successful evaluation scale for teacher performance "would articulate developmental levels, such as *not using, beginning, developing, applying, and innovating,*" and that, much like in SBS's example, each level should be accompanied by a narrative description of the accompanying goal (p. 18). Via this standards-based system, teachers may work toward clearly articulated objectives, and be evaluated based on criteria that they understand.

Additionally, standards-based grading helps ensure that a class does not become disproportionately teacher-centered. Teacher-centered learning has, until recently, largely dominated classroom settings. Traditionally, teachers conduct classes from a position of power, functioning as distributors of information rather than as facilitators of learning. Teachers are the core around which the classroom orbits; they set the rules, administer the course content, and ensure that the rules are not broken during students' acquisition of the course content. In theory, this approach to teaching provides students with the structure and direction necessary for effective learning. In practice, however, this type of environment may stifle otherwise motivated learners, in

that it prevents them from moving out from beneath the teacher's wing. Martell (1974) discusses the paradox:

The teacher's power to influence the direction and possible outcome of a student's future has an impact at once reassuring and forbidding. Constant reinforcement of the teacher's importance leads, more often than not, to an unquestioning attitude on the part of the student. (p. 112)

As teachers, we should want our students to question. Valuable learning experiences often begin with questions. Confusion is clarified via questions. And, perhaps most relevant to the discussions threading this essay, connections between coursework and learning objectives are made via dialogues initiated by questions. When the teacher is installed as an authoritarian figure, he or she essentially takes the place of a parent or guardian, and it becomes difficult for a student to question information issued from that authority. If teachers want students to take responsibility for themselves not just as students of a particular class, but as learners, developing learning strategies that will serve them both inside and outside the classroom, we must provide for the asking and answering of questions—some of which may even challenge us, and our teaching habits, in unanticipated ways.

In order to more fully understand the negative implications of exclusively teacher-centered learning, and the ways in which standards-based systems mitigate these effects, let us further examine common components of the teacher-centered approach. In her essay, "Teacher-Centered versus Student-Centered: Balancing Constraint and Theory in the Composition Classroom," English teacher Kain (2003) discusses the methodology behind the practice, stating, "Most critically, in teacher-centered approaches, judgments about appropriate areas and methods of inquiry, legitimacy of information, and what constitutes knowledge rest with the teacher" (p. 104). The central flaw of this design is that it fails to cast the student as an active participant in the development of his or her own education; the student exists in the classroom setting as an observer of the teacher's knowledge, confined to the peripheries of the learning experience.

Given the evidence suggesting that teacher-centered learning is deeply flawed, we must ask ourselves: Why is it still practiced by an overwhelming majority of education providers? The answer is that the most popular antidote to teacher-centered learning—student-centered learning—is not without flaws of its own. Kain (2003) describes this alternative in relation to the highly-prescriptive teacher-centered approach: "By contrast, student-centered approaches derive from constructivist views of education, in which the construction of knowledge is shared and learning is achieved through students' engagement with activities in which they are invested" (p. 104). Superficially, the above philosophy appears to solve many of the issues associated

with teacher-centered learning. It involves students in the learning process through sharing of knowledge, rather than administration of information; and participation in activities, rather than subjection to long-winded lecture. It redistributes unequal power dynamics, encouraging teachers and students each to take a similar stake in classroom productivity. It lacks, however, the highly-defined set of standards afforded by teacher-centered learning, which, in its rigidity, succeeds at least in providing students with clear expectations (however arbitrary those expectations may be).

The question then becomes, "How can a teacher combine the clear expectations of teacher-centered learning with the interactive and accommodating nature of student-centered learning?" The answer is to apply the principles of standards-based grading to the model of a student-centered learning environment, thereby creating an environment in which standards are well-defined, students are engaged, and the teacher is accessible. These respective methods of evaluation and instruction not only complement each other, but are in certain ways reliant upon each other. An activity conducted in the philosophy of student-centered learning may lack direction if it is not designed to reinforce a particular standard; similarly, a standard may present itself as arbitrary if its achievement is not facilitated through engaging activities and lively dialogues. Ideally, students should neither be shut out of their own education, helpless to influence the content or course of the experience, nor should they be without guidance, and a set of objectives to reference in moments of uncertainty. Using standards-based grading practices to evaluate progress within a student-centered learning environment helps teachers achieve this ideal.

Conclusion

In conclusion, modern grading practices are rife with complexity and contradiction. They are remnants of archaic conventions, and hybrids of newer methodologies not yet tried by time and application. They are student or teacher oriented, inaccessibly rigid or unhelpfully absent of structure and definition. Amid these distinctions, points-based grading reveals itself as an objective failure, insufficient in meeting the needs of any student focused on attaining a comprehensive, impactful education, and any teacher concerned with identifying and meeting the needs of his or her students.

The most effective teaching and grading methodologies refrain from extremes, combining useful features from a number of partially-successful practices, in order to create a premium system of education capable of adapting to the requirements of those who use it. Standards-based grading emerges from the study of these methodologies as a system worth advocating; neither intransigent nor unstructured; it accommodates different learning styles, sets attainable goals, and provides teachers with the opportunity to meet students wherever they are in the process of achieving those goals. Perhaps

most importantly, standards-based grading separates and elevates the advent of learning from points and numbers in a gradebook, lending new inspiration to the ages-old pursuit of education.

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Author Notes

Danielle L. Iamarino
Northern Arizona University
Flagstaff, AZ 86001
iamarinodl@gmail.com

Danielle L. Iamarino is a proponent and researcher of alternative and holistic approaches to education. She currently resides in Flagstaff, Arizona and teaches English composition at Northern Arizona University.



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