

thinkpoint

Grading and the formative assessment process

By John Lane

Introduction

This ThinkPoint considers how teachers might promote deep learning through enactment of the formative assessment process in the context of traditional grading systems. It also explores the traditional system's perverse incentives to earn high grades by any means necessary, even if that means not learning very much. These incentives might actually inhibit the quality of teaching and learning, in general, and the enactment of the formative assessment process, in particular.

Understanding grading and the grading system

We give grades to students to accomplish so many things. Grades summarize and communicate information about how students are doing in school to a variety of stakeholders. That is, grades symbolize achievement. Ironically, because grades are symbols of achievement, pressures mount that collectively threaten to divorce them from achievement.

When grades are the symbols of achievement, it is incredibly tempting for students to pursue the grade rather than the learning.

Indeed, earning high grades with as little learning as possible is its own kind of perverse efficiency, as David Labaree (1999) pointed out two decades ago. When students earn high grades most, if not all, stakeholders feel like they have “won.” Students, parents, principals, superintendents, and school board members all may have different reasons for benefitting

from this grade inflation and its causes, as a recent article in The Yale News (2017) details. At Yale, 97% of faculty believe that students received higher grades than they actually earned. This nearly universal belief suggests grading even in America's top universities is not well aligned with actual achievement, as grades “inflate” in a way unrelated to improvements in learning.

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from high grades. As students, parents, and administrators push for high grades, pressure for their distribution mounts. In most settings, teachers are free to give as many high grades as they would like. That is, high grades are not scarce. This is contrary to how many grading systems were first devised; early assumptions held that many students would receive C's, fewer would receive B's, and fewer still would receive A's. Now, however, the distribution of grades in some classrooms is positively skewed, with more A's than C's being awarded to students.

Given this context (a skewed distribution and unlimited supply of excellent grades), teachers may feel considerable pressure to assign high grades generously, a pervasive phenomenon that affects even the most prestigious settings. No institution, it seems, is immune

In this grading “system,” then, rather than being a summary of learning, grades have become divorced from learning. The 1995 movie *Clueless* captures this idea perfectly in a scene between a teenager (Cher) and her father (Mel). Earlier, Mel grounded Cher because of her poor report card, and, subsequently, Cher persuaded her teachers to change her grades. She then shows her dad her new marks and the two engage in the following exchange:

Mel (after examining Cher's new report card): “You mean to tell me that you argued your way from a C+ to an A-?”

Cher: “Totally based on my powers of persuasion. You proud?”

Mel: “Honey, I couldn't be happier than if they were based on real grades.”

The situation described in this scene hits home for most people, because



they have experienced it firsthand, or they have witnessed this in with others. Many students are at least familiar with the arrangement that grades may or may not be based on actual learning.

Recommendations for promoting learning in a less-than-perfect system

Acknowledging the challenges of the current grading system likely leads to one of two conclusions. The first conclusion is that the grading system needs to be overhauled entirely. However, after decades of attempts to change the grading system met fierce pushback from parents, policymakers, and the public, such changes have come and gone. Hence wholesale change seems unlikely or, at best, extremely slow in coming. The second conclusion is to simply throw up one’s hands and submit to the system as it is. This ThinkPoint suggests a third option: to recognize the forces of the current system and countervail these forces through implementing the formative assessment process.

So, what are we to do with grading? This ThinkPoint makes two primary claims. First, traditional grading systems and the pressures that go with them are not likely to go anywhere. Second, given the intractability of the current grading system, teachers who seek to change will have to devise ways within their classrooms to align with the Components and Elements of the formative assessment process. The six recommendations that follow are designed to provide guidance to educators who would like to make grading more meaningful by attaching them to the principles and practices of the formative assessment process in the context of traditional grading systems.

Suggestion 1:
Set clear learning targets for students, integrated in content standards, and then base grading strictly on mastery of learning or

the extent of achievement of the learning targets.

Learning targets should feature the content to be learned and how students will demonstrate their mastery of this content. When teachers base grading on mastery of learning targets, high grades need not be scarce, since all students can potentially (and legitimately) be A students. In fact, grades will not fall in a normal distribution if teachers are doing their job well—helping each student to achieve mastery of the learning. In other words, there is no reason that high grades need to be rare. However, grades should be based on achievement and must be founded on a student’s demonstrated mastery.

Suggestion 2:
Provide opportunities for students to work toward and demonstrate their mastery while engaged in the authentic work of the discipline.

Rather than having students complete activities that earn points that accumulate toward a final grade, such as on worksheets, teachers should provide students with the opportunity to write, construct, explore, experiment, and demonstrate in ways consistent with high standards of disciplinary

learning. These experiences should surface students’ emerging competency and mastery of disciplinary content. This is real work that, if done well, does deserve high grades. Again, this is something all students can achieve so high grades do not need to be scarce if this is carried out well.

Suggestion 3:
Craft rubrics or other standards of performance that capture essential features of mastery of the learning targets and then provide formative feedback to students during learning in reference to these rubrics.

High quality rubrics that capture the essential features of mastery of disciplinary learning are critical tools in assessing student progress, as well as providing them specific feedback that they can use to further their learning. An example from a performance assessment developed for use in CBE-based assessment is shown in Table 1:

When teachers prioritize use of the formative assessment process in their classroom, instead of giving students points on assignments that aggregate into a final grade, teachers provide students criterion-referenced, descriptive feedback.

Table 1: Example Teacher Scoring Rubric—Student Version

Dimension	Not Yet Meeting Expectations	Meeting Expectations	Exceeding Expectations
Comprehension of Text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifies a partial or inaccurate central idea in a text with inaccurate or unrelated text evidence to explain its development and/or relationship to supporting ideas. Identifies a connection and/or interrelationship between individuals, events, or ideas; an explanation is unclear or inaccurate and may not include the use of text evidence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Determines a central idea in a text and analyzes its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to supporting ideas, using multiple pieces of text evidence. Explains and elaborates the connections and interrelationship between individuals, events, or ideas, based on text evidence and inferences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Determines and explains a central idea of a text and analyzes how it emerges and develops over the course of the text, and how it is supported using multiple pieces of text evidence. Explains and analyzes the relationships and interactions between individuals, events, or ideas, based on text evidence and inferences.

Source: Michigan Department of Education Performance Assessment Booklet

Suggestion 4:
Provide multiple opportunities
for students to act on formative
feedback provided.

The feedback that teachers provide should be couched in the mastery features of the rubric and in reference to the learning target. Ideally, teachers' feedback should be formative, meaning that the feedback communicates clearly to students where their demonstrated achievement "lands" in reference to the standards for mastery and what they might do next to further their learning.

Example of teacher feedback:

Your current essay draft clearly defines your main argument. This is an important first step in writing a high-quality persuasive essay. The current draft, however, lists a few facts but not does clearly explain how these facts support your main argument. In your next draft, you will need to decide if these facts are evidence that support your argument. If so, you must explain how these facts relate to your main argument and support it.

Teachers must then provide students opportunities to act on this feedback until they have demonstrated mastery.

Suggestion 5:
Make instructional decisions about
next steps based on evidence of
student mastery.

While the students are making "learning decisions" in response to teacher feedback, teachers

should be thinking about their next instructional moves. During this phase, teachers should be asking themselves questions like, "Given where my students are in their learning, what might I do next to help them?" Specifically, teachers can be thinking about quality learning activities (like those described above) they might ask students to engage in. Since students learn at different paces, the teachers will need to differentiate their plans for different groups of students or individual students. The goal is to help students to move forward in their learning, regardless of where they currently are.

Suggestion 6:
Pool mastery of learning targets
into a final grading.

Ultimately, teachers must assign a grade. For many teachers, recommendations 1-5 will be a welcome set of practices; yet, they might get frustrated by this final, but necessary, step. Fortunately, there are ways that teachers can award grades in line with formative assessment principles, even in traditional grading systems. Teachers should work the details out

Example grading scale:

A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-
36-40	32-35	28-31	24-27	20-23	16-19	12-15	10-11

This student's point total across the 10 tasks = 33 points. This student received an A-.

with colleagues, but whatever the process, grades should be based on some aggregation of demonstrated learning and mastery of learning targets. For instance, grades could be based on the number of learning targets as well as performance levels that a student has mastered in relation to the total number of learning targets and performance levels a teacher has established.

Another method might be to aggregate the performance levels that the student achieved across all

learning targets to arrive at a more nuanced total score. In the instance above where the teacher has had students address ten learning targets, each with four performance levels (1 to 4), the overall potential total scores range from 10 (or lower if students did not attempt work on some learning targets) to 40. Students with total scores from 35 (or another level) to 40 might earn A's, 30-34 B's, and so forth (Again, please note that this is merely a suggested way to aggregate student performance into grades).

Table 2: Example Student Score Report and Grade Scale

Task	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
1	1	2	3	4
2	1	2	3	4
3	1	2	3	4
4	1	2	3	4
5	1	2	3	4
6	1	2	3	4
7	1	2	3	4
8	1	2	3	4
9	1	2	3	4
10	1	2	3	4

Table 2 shows an example that shows where this sample student is at the end of a marking period in achieving ten learning targets addressed during the marking period.

In this example, the student has mastered nine of the 10 class learning targets, so she would earn an A-.

A further refinement of this type of grading would be to note what improvement a student made



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on each learning target from, for example, the first marking period to the second one. Has the student maintained high levels of achievement (i.e., 4s remain as 4s)? How much has the student increased her scores that were lower than 4s? Award one point for each score improvement (e.g., one point for score increase from 2 to 3, or a score increase from 3 to 4; do this for all learning targets).

Author



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Conclusion

Grading is a traditional and entrenched feature of American schooling that is unlikely to be abolished, at least in most settings (Tyack & Tobin, 1994). Importantly, our suggestion is that teachers should not wait for the “system” to change, but rather they can enact the formative assessment process to more closely align or strengthen learning and grading. Even within

the current systems, many teachers have great flexibility in how they approach grading in their classrooms. Teachers can use this discretion to establish grading practices that are grounded in clear learning targets of disciplinary content, authentic tasks, clear standards for mastery, formative feedback, and opportunities to pursue learning until mastery is achieved.

References

- Labaree, D. (1999). How to succeed in school without really learning. Yale University Press.
- Treisman, R. & Yaffle-Bellany, D. (2017, September 13). Grade inflation abounds, faculty say. *The Yale News*. <https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2017/09/13/grade-inflation-abounds-faculty-say/>
- Tyack, D. B., & Cuban, L. (1995). *Tinkering toward utopia*. Harvard University Press.

Reflection Points

- 1 Do you think grade inflation is a problem at your school or the schools you work with? If not, how have educators in your context prevented grades from becoming inflated? If so, what is the source of the problem and what might educators in your context do about it?
- 2 This ThinkPoint suggests that educators do not wait for a major system overhaul and instead engage in better grading practices in the system as it currently is. What do you make of this suggestion?
- 3 As you read through the suggestions for moving forward in the current system, which suggestions do you agree or disagree with? What suggestions would you add or take away?
- 4 Suggestion 6 offers one potential strategy for grading in a way that reflects achievement. Do you think this strategy would work in your context? What might you change about this suggestion?

Resources for further learning

Formative Assessment for Michigan Educators (FAME) website
FAMEMichigan.org

Learning Point—What do we mean by formative assessment?
qr.link/4KvILF

Learning Point—What do we mean by ‘equitable grading’?
(Michigan Assessment Consortium)
qr.link/RD4Blw

Learning Point—Grading for learning: Guidelines for supporting student success
bit.ly/LP-Grading-for-Learning

ThinkPoint— Deforming the formative: How a summative mindset thwarts the aims of formative assessment, by Arthur Chiaravalli
qr.link/OtdMoD



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