

Why I Had to Give Up Grades or Give Up Teaching

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Like many teachers, I have spent countless hours trying to devise a perfect grading system, one that is equal parts fair and rigorous, that will reward students for hard work and punish certain behaviors that I saw as detrimental to my students' progress. For twenty years I worked on this, tweaking certain policies, changing the weight of various assignments, assigning extra points for this or that. Sometimes, after revising my grading system, I ended up with a system much like the one I had scrapped two years before. Though it had long seemed to be a fruitless task, I kept working at it. If only I could crack the code of grading, I thought, I could unlock a world where students were eager and motivated, and I could just focus on helping them learn.

If you're a teacher, spoiler alert: No such grading system exists. Of course not, right? But tinkering with grading systems, as all teachers do, distracts us from thinking critically about why we grade in the first place. One might say that the purpose of grades is to rank and categorize students, to distinguish the "successful" students from the less successful ones. Teachers can then intervene and provide more help to the less successful students, or so the argument goes.

But students are often categorized very early in life, causing students with low grades to doubt their abilities, while students with high grades become even more confident, sometimes to the point of complacency. In short, by the time we enter adolescence, grades have begun to define us. Some of my students have said that they felt that they could never escape being just a C student, as though their destiny had been carved into stone by all of those red C's given by well-meaning teachers. Students take their grades to heart, as true reflections of their abilities, when in reality grades are never, ever an objective measure of student learning. Even on a math test, someone is behind the test, deciding what questions to ask and in what words. Multiple-choice tests in particular can be poor measures of student learning because less-confident students sometimes overthink the choices and start to worry about being tricked.

Indeed, grading seems to me like a giant trick that we are playing on our students. We tell our students that the grade is "objective," knowing that it is not. We tell our students that grades don't matter—only learning matters!—while in the next breath we hand out a graded exam worth 100 points. Or we tell our students that grades do matter, that they determine your future, when this is not true, either. Many students who received low grades in high school go on to become excellent students in

community college. And beyond the boundaries of school, whatever grade you earned in high school biology is totally irrelevant, except for how it might have shaped your feelings about your possibilities in life.

Despite the pain wrought by grades, despite the hours wasted grading student work, teachers are reluctant to give up grades, and that's because grades have one other, mostly unspoken purpose: They are used, to good effect, as a tool of control. Teachers deduct points for late work or absences. They offer extra credit points for attending a school event. They tell students to study hard because this exam is worth 30% of their entire grade! When I carefully revised and re-revised my grading system, I did so to try to "shape" my students' behavior, much like I use treats to get my dogs to go into their beds. Teachers, myself included, have defended such shaping behaviors as being "for students' own good." The idea is that we can use grades a tool to get students to do what is good for them, thus training students to make better choices.

But this is at the heart of why grades act as a poison on student motivation. Grades take away our students' agency and autonomy, both of which are at the heart of intrinsic motivation. We can't feel motivation when someone is controlling us, telling us what is "good" in what we are doing and what is "bad." Grades communicate that we should do things the way the teacher wants it, or else pay the price in your grade. Such messages kill our excitement to learn. I started to realize this when I learned to sew at the age of 38. I once wore to a conference a handmade dress whose hem looked like it had been chewed up by a cat. But I was proud to have made something with my own hands, and that gave me the motivation to keep working at it. If someone had been "assessing" my work, I surely would have earned poor marks and felt too discouraged to continue. New learners are sensitive, and a grade has the power to snuff out the delicate flame of excitement. Even among the strongest of students, grades encourage students to play it safe in their work because taking a risk or taking on a challenge could negatively impact their grade.

By using grades to motivate our students, we have trained our students to see grades as their only source of motivation in school. Education has become a transactional activity, where students trade work for a grade, hoping to put out the least amount of work for the highest grade possible. Learning, for most students, is beside the point. If we bemoan this, we must realize that we caused it. We have taught students that grades are the reason to do something and then we criticize students for acting on that lesson. Some people have asked me, if we abandon grades, how would we motivate students? Such a question makes me want to throw up my hands and scream into the sky. It's as if we have forgotten that learning is inherently interesting. It's as if we think our students will just be lumps on a log if we don't hold grades over their heads as a carrot or a stick. Are we that uncreative, as a society, that we can't think of ways to tap into our students' natural curiosity?

I found it strange to read articles that expressed concern over students "getting behind" due to schooling in the age of the coronavirus. What could be a better

learning experience than living through a global pandemic? I would imagine that many students are wondering how we got here, and why the U.S. has not done a better job of curbing the virus. Are we helping students gain answers to their questions, or are we sticking to the script given to us by Common Core? I talked to a kid who said that in his third-grade class he had to memorize the facts of the various Native American tribes. Having just finished the amazing book *1491: New Revelations about the Americas before Columbus* by Charles C. Mann, I couldn't help but think that there were other, much more important things to learn about Native Americans. This reminded me that "assessment" shapes how we teach. When we have to assign a grade, we usually teach something "measurable," often involving the memorization of facts, which are quickly forgotten after the test. Ironically, the test is used as "proof" of the student's learning. The student understands very little about the Native Americans, but he does learn how to get by in the educational system. Keep your head down, memorize, take tests, repeat.

For me, giving up grades was not a choice. It was a life raft away from the cynicism and small-mindedness of the educational system. I was going to drown in hopelessness if I stayed within that system. If someone told me now that I would have to start grading my students' work again, I would have to stop teaching.

And yet grades still control me and my students. My institutions requires me to assign a final grade, and I struggle to know how to assign this grade. I do feel that my role as a teacher is to provide accountability for my students, but I don't want to use grades as a threat or as a reward. We can hold students accountable for their work without grades, but it requires strong relationships and trust. And this is made harder by the fact that many students do not trust their teachers. And who could blame them, when we have been lying to them for so long?