

RETHINKING GRADING AND ASSESSMENT

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For over a century, the primary currency of education has been the grade. The familiar A-F scale, percentages, and class rankings have become so deeply embedded in our academic consciousness that they are often accepted as an inevitable, natural part of schooling. However, a growing movement of educators, researchers, and cognitive scientists is challenging this orthodoxy, arguing that our traditional systems of grading and assessment are not only imperfect but are often actively harmful to the learning process. Rethinking assessment is not about making courses easier; it is about making learning more meaningful, equitable, and focused on genuine intellectual growth.

The traditional grading model has its roots in the Industrial Revolution, designed to sort and rank students for efficiency, much like factories sorted products. This system prioritizes several problematic pillars: point accumulation, the averaging of performance over time, the inclusion of non-academic factors like behavior and punctuality, and the culture of high-stakes, one-shot testing. Each of these pillars contains fundamental flaws that undermine learning.

Averaging grades across a semester is a statistical and pedagogical misstep. It punishes students for the learning curve they are expected to experience. A student who struggles initially with a complex concept like algebraic equations but demonstrates mastery by the end of the term does not have a "C" understanding; they have an A-level understanding that was achieved through persistence. Averaging their early failures with their later success misrepresents their final capability and discourages the productive struggle that is essential for deep learning.

Furthermore, traditional grading often conflates academic achievement with compliance. Points are deducted for late work, messy binders, or talking in class. This practice sends a confusing message: is the grade a measure of understanding or of

obedience? A student may master the standards of a history course but receive a B because they turned in assignments late, thereby communicating that their historical knowledge is deficient. This undermines the authenticity and purpose of assessment.

The high-stakes nature of traditional tests also fosters a culture of performance anxiety rather than intellectual curiosity. Students learn to cram for exams, prioritizing short-term recall over long-term retention and deep comprehension. The goal becomes earning points, not constructing knowledge. This extrinsic motivation can extinguish the intrinsic joy of learning, turning education into a transactional experience.

In response to these shortcomings, several powerful alternative frameworks have emerged. The core principle uniting them is a shift in the fundamental purpose of assessment: from an evaluation of learning (summative assessment) to an evaluation for learning (formative assessment).

Standards-Based Grading (SBG) is one of the most prominent alternatives. SBG decouples grades from behavior and instead ties them directly to mastery of specific, clearly defined learning objectives or "standards." In an SBG system, a student's grade is not an average of all their quiz scores and homework. Instead, it is a reflection of their current level of proficiency on each standard. Students are often given multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery through reassessment, sending the powerful message that learning is a process and that mistakes are opportunities for growth, not final judgments. The final grade provides a detailed profile of what a student knows and can do, rather than a single, opaque number.

Upgrading is a more radical approach that questions the necessity of grades altogether. Championed by scholars like Jesse Stommel and Alfie Kohn, upgrading involves replacing traditional letter grades with descriptive feedback, self-assessment, and collaborative reflection between student and teacher. The focus is entirely on the process of learning. Students may compile portfolios of their work, write reflective letters explaining their growth, and participate in conversations about their progress.

The goal is to cultivate metacognition—the ability to think about one's own thinking—and to foster intrinsic motivation. In this model, a grade may be required at

the end of a term for institutional purposes, but it is often negotiated or determined collaboratively based on evidence of learning, rather than simply calculated.

Portfolio-Based Assessment is a key practice within both SBG and ungrading frameworks. Instead of relying on isolated tests, students build a curated collection of their work over time. This portfolio, which can include essays, projects, research, reflections, and revised assignments, provides a holistic and robust picture of their growth, effort, and ultimate achievement. It values the learning journey itself and allows students to take ownership of their progress.

The benefits of rethinking assessment are profound. When the threat of a permanent low grade is removed, students are more likely to take intellectual risks, attempt challenging problems, and view feedback as constructive rather than critical. Equity is enhanced, as the system no longer penalizes students for a lack of prior knowledge or external challenges that may affect their pace. The focus shifts from "What did I get?" to "What did I learn?" and "How can I improve?"

Implementing these changes is not without its challenges. It requires a significant shift in mindset from teachers, students, and parents who are accustomed to traditional systems. It demands more time for providing meaningful feedback and managing reassessments. Schools and universities must also navigate institutional policies that rely on GPAs and class rankings for scholarships and admissions.

Despite these hurdles, the movement is gaining momentum because the stakes are so high. In a world that demands critical thinking, creativity, and lifelong learning, we cannot afford an assessment system that rewards compliance, encourages superficial understanding, and kills curiosity. Rethinking grading is about aligning our practices with our deepest educational values. It is about creating a system where assessment is no longer a weapon for sorting and ranking, but a compassionate, informative, and empowering tool that truly serves the cause of learning. By daring to imagine a classroom without the traditional gradebook, we can create an environment where every student feels safe to struggle, to grow, and to ultimately succeed on their own terms.