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The Case Against Grades

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When schools cling to letter and number ratings, students get stuck in a system that undermines learning.

> I remember the first time that a grading rubric was attached to a piece of my writing… Suddenly all the joy was taken away. I was writing for a grade—I was no longer exploring for me. I want to get that back. Will I ever get that back?

—*Claire, a student* (in Olson, 2006)

Enough has been written about academic assessment to fill a library, but when you stop to think about it, the whole enterprise really amounts to a straightforward two-step dance. We need to collect information about how students are doing, and then we need to share that information (along with our judgments, perhaps) with the students and their parents. Gather and report—that's pretty much it.

You say the devil is in the details? Maybe so, but I'd argue that too much attention to the particulars of implementation may be distracting us from the bigger picture—or at least from a pair of remarkable conclusions that emerge from the best theory, practice, and research on the subject: *Collecting information doesn't require tests, and sharing that information doesn't require grades*. In fact, students would be a lot better off without either of these relics from a less enlightened age.

A discussion of the problem with tests must wait for another day. Here, our task is to take a hard look at the second practice—the use of letters or numbers to report how well students have done.

The Effects of Grading

Most of the criticisms of grading today were laid out forcefully and eloquently decades ago (see Crooks, 1933; De Zouche, 1945; Kirschenbaum, Simon, & Napier, 1971; Marshall, 1968), and these early essays make for eye-opening reading. They remind us how long we've known there's something wrong with what we're doing, as well as how little progress we've made in acting on that realization.

In the 1980s and 1990s, educational psychologists systematically studied the effects of grades. As I've reported elsewhere (Kohn, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c), the research supports three robust conclusions:

- *Grades tend to diminish students' interest in whatever they're learning*. A grading orientation and a learning orientation have been shown to be inversely related. Also, as far as I can tell, every study that has investigated the impact of grades on intrinsic motivation has found a negative effect.
- *Grades create a preference for the easiest possible task*. Impress on students that what they're doing will count toward their grade, and their response will likely be to avoid taking unnecessary intellectual risks. They'll choose a shorter book, or a project on a familiar topic, to minimize the chance of doing poorly—not because they're "unmotivated," but because they're rational. They're responding to adults who, by telling them the goal is to get a good mark, have sent the message that success matters more than learning.
- *Grades tend to reduce the quality of students' thinking*. Instead of wondering "How do we know that's true?" they're apt to ask "Is this going to be on the test?" In one experiment, students who were told they'd be graded on how well they learned a social studies lesson had more trouble understanding the main point of the text than did students who expected no grades. Even on a measure of rote recall, the graded group

remembered fewer facts a week later (Grolnick & Ryan, 1987).

Research on the effects of grading has slowed in the last couple of decades, but the studies that are still being done reinforce the earlier findings (see, for example, Anderman & Murdock, 2007; Pulfrey, Buch, & Butera, 2011; White & Fantone, 2010). More important, no recent research has contradicted the three earlier conclusions.

Why Grading Is Inherently Problematic

A student asked his Zen master how long it would take to reach enlightenment. "Ten years," the master said. But, the student persisted, what if he studied very hard? "Then 20 years," the master responded. Surprised, the student asked how long it would take if he worked very, *very* hard and became the most dedicated student in the ashram. "In that case, 30 years," the master replied. His explanation: "If you have one eye on how close you are to achieving your goal, that leaves only one eye for your task."

To understand why research finds what it does about grades, we need to shift our focus from educational measurement techniques to broader psychological and pedagogical questions that illuminate a series of misconceived assumptions behind the use of grading.

Motivation

Although it's true that many students, after a few years of traditional schooling, could be described as motivated by grades, what counts is the nature of their motivation. Extrinsic motivation, which includes a desire for better marks, not only differs from intrinsic motivation (a desire to learn for its own sake) but often erodes it (Kohn 1999a). If nourishing students' desire to learn is a primary goal for us, then grading is problematic by its very nature.

Achievement

Maehr and Midgley (1996) pointed out that "an overemphasis on assessment can actually undermine the pursuit of excellence" (p. 7). That unsettling conclusion is based on their own empirical findings as well as those of many others, including Carol Dweck, Carole Ames, Ruth Butler, and John Nicholls (see Kohn, 1999b). In brief, the more students are led to focus on *how well* they're doing, the less engaged they tend to be with *what* they're doing.

It follows that all assessment must be done carefully and sparingly lest students become so concerned about their achievement (how good they are at doing something—or, worse, how their performance compares to others') that they're no longer thinking about the learning itself. Even a well-meaning teacher may produce a roomful of students who are so busy monitoring their own reading skills that they're no longer excited by the stories they're reading. Assessment consultants worry that grades may not accurately reflect student performance; educational psychologists worry because grades fix students' attention *on* their performance.

Quantification

When people ask me, "Isn't it important to measure how well students are learning (or teachers are teaching)?" I invite them to rethink their choice of verb. There is certainly value in *assessing* the quality of learning and teaching, but that doesn't mean it's always necessary, or even possible, to *measure* those things—to turn them into numbers. Indeed, "measurable outcomes may be the least significant results of learning" (McNeil, 1986, p. xviii)—a realization that offers a refreshing counterpoint to today's data-obsessed, corporate-style "school reform."

To talk about what happens in classrooms, let alone in students' heads, as moving forward or backward in specifiable degrees is not only simplistic because it fails to capture much of what is going on, but also destructive because it may change what is going on for the worse. Once we're compelled to focus only on what can be reduced to numbers, such as how many grammatical errors are present in a composition or how many mathematical algorithms have been committed to memory, thinking has been severely

compromised. And that's exactly what happens when we try to fit learning into a 4-point, 5-point, or (heaven help us) 100-point scale.

Curriculum

The result of merely aligning assessment to one's goals or curriculum is that teachers may accurately measure how well students have mastered a collection of facts and skills whose value is questionable—yet never questioned. Portfolios, for example, allow students to thoughtfully gather meaningful examples of learning; they can be constructive if they replace grades rather than being used to yield them. But there's little point if the curriculum is dominated by worksheets.

Improving Grading: A Fool's Errand?

> I had been advocating standards-based grading, which is a very important movement in its own right, but it took a push from some great educators to make me realize that if I wanted to focus my assessment around authentic feedback, then I should just abandon grades altogether.

—*New Jersey middle school teacher Jason Bedell* (2010)

Much of what is prescribed in the name of "assessing for learning" or "formative assessment" leaves me uneasy: The recommended practices often seem prefabricated and mechanistic; the imperatives of data collection seem to upstage the students themselves and the goal of helping them become more enthusiastic about what they're doing. Still, if it's done only occasionally and with humility, I think it's possible to assess for learning. But *grading* for learning is, to paraphrase a 1960s-era slogan, rather like bombing for peace. Rating and ranking students (and their efforts to figure things out) are inherently counterproductive.

If we take the research seriously, then the absence of grades is a necessary condition for promoting deep thinking and a desire to engage in it. It's worth lingering on this proposition in light of a variety of efforts to sell us formulas to improve our grading techniques, none of which addresses the problems with grading, per se.

- It's not enough to replace letters or numbers with labels (*exceeds expectations, meets expectations*, and so on). If you're sorting students into four or five piles, you're still grading them.
- It's not enough to tell students in advance exactly what's expected of them. Teachers may persuade themselves they're being fairer to students "if they specify, in listlike fashion, exactly what must be learned to gain a satisfactory grade." But this strategy only serves to reinforce the assumption that school is "a test, rather than an adventure in ideas" (Nicholls & Hazzard, 1993, p. 77).
- It's not enough to disseminate grades more efficiently—for example, by posting them online. There is a growing technology, as the late Gerald Bracey once remarked, "that permits us to do in nanoseconds things that we shouldn't be doing at all" (Mathews, 2006). In fact, posting grades online is a significant step backward because it enhances the salience of those grades and therefore their destructive effects on learning.
- It's not enough to add narrative reports. "When comments and grades coexist, the comments are written to justify the grade" (Wilson, 2009, p. 60). Teachers report that students, for their part, often just turn to the grade and ignore the comments. Research confirms that narratives are helpful only in the absence of grades (Butler, 1988; Pulfrey et al., 2011).
- It's not enough to use "standards-based" grading. That phrase may suggest more consistency or a reliance on more elaborate formulas in determining grades, greater specificity about what each grade signifies, or an increase in the number of tasks or skills

> that are graded. At best, these prescriptions do nothing to address the fundamental problems with grading. At worst, they exacerbate those problems. In addition to the simplistic premise that it's always good to have more data, we find a conviction shared by the behaviorists of yesteryear that learning can and should be broken down into its components, each to be evaluated separately. More frequent temperature-taking produces exactly the kind of disproportionate attention to performance (at the expense of learning) that researchers have found to be so damaging.

The term "standards-based" is sometimes intended just to mean that grading is aligned with a given set of objectives, in which case our first response should be to inquire into the value of those objectives (as well as the extent to which students were invited to help formulate them). If grades are based on state standards, there's particular reason to be concerned because those standards are often too specific, age-inappropriate, superficial, and standardized by definition.

Finally, "standards-based" may refer to something similar to criterion-based testing, in which the idea is to avoid grading students on a curve. This practice surely represents an improvement over a system in which the number of top marks is made artificially scarce and students are set against one another. But here we've peeled back the outer skin of the onion (competition) only to reveal more noxious layers beneath: extrinsic motivation, numerical ratings, and the tendency to emphasize achievement at the expense of learning.

If we begin with a desire to assess more often, or to produce more data, or to improve the consistency of our grading, then certain prescriptions will follow. If, however, our point of departure is the desire for students to understand ideas from the inside out, or to get a kick out of playing with words and numbers, or to be in charge of their own learning, then we may come to see grading as a huge, noisy, fuel-guzzling, smoke-belching machine that constantly requires repairs and new parts, when what we should be doing is pulling the plug.

Deleting (or Diluting) Grades

Replacing letter and number grades with narrative assessments or student-teacher conferences—qualitative summaries of student progress offered in writing or as part of a conversation—is not a utopian fantasy. It has been done successfully in many elementary and middle schools and even in some high schools (Kohn, 1999c). Naturally, objections will be raised to this—or any—significant policy change, but once students and their parents have been shown the relevant research, reassured about their concerns, and invited to participate in constructing alternative forms of assessment, the abolition of grades proves to be not only realistic but also an enormous improvement over the status quo. Sometimes it's only after grading has ended that we realize just how harmful it has been.

To address one common fear, the graduates of grade-free high schools are indeed accepted by selective private colleges and large public universities—on the basis of narrative reports and detailed descriptions of the curriculum (as well as recommendations, essays, and interviews), which collectively offer a fuller picture of the applicant than does a grade point average. Moreover, these schools point out that their students are often more motivated and proficient learners, and thus better prepared for college, than their counterparts at traditional schools who have been preoccupied with grades. (College admission is no bar to eliminating grades in elementary and middle schools because colleges are largely indifferent to what students have done before high school.)

Even when administrators aren't ready to abandon traditional report cards, individual teachers can help rescue learning in their own classrooms with a two-pronged strategy to "neuter grades," as one teacher described it. First, they can stop putting letter or number grades on individual assignments and instead offer only qualitative feedback. Report cards are bad enough; the destructive effects are compounded when students are rated on what they do in school day after day. Teachers can mitigate considerable harm by replacing grades with authentic assessments, and as we've seen, the feedback they offer

becomes much more useful in the absence of letter or number ratings.

Second, although teachers may be required to submit a final grade, they are not required to decide unilaterally what that grade will be. Thus, students can be invited to participate in the process either as a negotiation (with the teacher having the final say) or by simply grading themselves. If people find that idea alarming, it's probably because they realize it creates a more democratic classroom, one in which teachers must create a pedagogy and a curriculum that will truly engage students rather than use grades to coerce them into doing whatever they're told. In fact, negative reactions to this proposal ("It's unrealistic!") point up how grades mostly function as a mechanism for controlling students.

I spoke recently to several middle and high school teachers who have "de-graded" their classes. Jeff Robbins, who has taught 8th grade science in New Jersey for 15 years, concedes that "life was easier with grades" because they take so much less time than meaningful assessment. That efficiency came at a huge cost, though: Kids were stressed out and also preferred to avoid intellectual risks: "They'll take an easier assignment that will guarantee the *A*."

Initially, Robbins announced that any project or test could be improved and resubmitted for a higher grade. Unfortunately, that failed to address the underlying problem, and he eventually realized he had to stop grading entirely. Now, he offers comments to all of his 125 students and makes abbreviated notes in his grade book. At the end of the term, he grabs each student for a brief conversation, asking what they learned and how they learned it. "Only at the very end do I ask what grade will reflect it…and we'll collectively arrive at something." Like many other teachers I've spoken to over the years, Robbins says he almost always accepts students' suggestions because they typically pick the same grade that he would have.

Jim Drier, an English teacher at Mundelein High School in Illinois who has about 90 students ranging "from at-risk to AP," was relieved to find that it "really doesn't take that long" to write at least a brief note on students' assignments—"a reaction to what they did and some advice on how they might improve"—in lieu of a grade. (The final mark for the term is based on his students' self-assessments.) "The things that grades make kids do are heart-breaking for an educator," he says: arguing with teachers, fighting with parents, cheating, memorizing facts just for a test and then forgetting them.

Drier believes that without grades, his relationships with students are better. "Their writing improves more quickly, and the things they learn stay with them longer. I've had lots of kids tell me it's changed their attitude about coming to school." He expected resistance from parents, but in three years only one parent has objected. It may help that he sends a letter home to explain exactly what he's doing and why. Now two of his colleagues are eliminating grades in their own classrooms.

A key priority for these and other teachers is the opportunity for students to help design assessments and reflect on their purposes, individually and as a class. Notice how different this is from the more common variant of "self-assessment" in which students merely monitor their progress toward the teacher's (or legislature's) goals and in which they must reduce their learning to numerical ratings with gradelike rubrics.

Joe Bower (2010), an educator in Red Deer, Alberta, has collected testimonies from many teachers working to abolish grading at his blog *For the Love of Learning*. Some *evaluate* their students' performance (in qualitative terms, of course), but others believe it's more constructive to offer only *feedback*—which is to say, information. Teachers also report a variety of reactions to de-grading not only from colleagues and administrators but also from students themselves, many of whom go through a period of detox. John Spencer (2010), an Arizona middle school teacher, concedes that

> many of the "high-performing" students were angry at first. They saw it as unfair. They viewed school as work and their peers as competitors... Yet, over time they switch and they calm down. They end up learning more once they aren't feeling the pressure.

The Courage to Change

Grades are not a necessary part of schooling. They don't prepare students for the "real world"—unless one has in mind a world where interest in learning and quality of thinking are unimportant. Still, it takes courage to do right by kids in an era when the quantitative matters more than the qualitative, when meeting (someone else's) standards counts more than exploring ideas, and when anything "rigorous" is automatically assumed to be valuable. We have to be willing to challenge the conventional wisdom—which in this case means asking not how to improve grades, but how to jettison them once and for all.

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