GRADING HAS ALWAYS MADE WRITING BETTER

Mitchell R. James

> "To grade is a hell of a weapon. It may not rest on your hip, potent and rigid like a cop's gun, but in the long run it's more powerful."—Larry Tjarks

There are a number of problems surrounding the ubiquitous practice of grading student writing. In *Schools Without Failure,* William Glasser notes that grading tends to be perceived by students as various levels of failure. In addition, Marie Wilson argues that a focus on failure leads teachers to approach student writing in search of deficiencies instead of strengths, which puts students in a state of preventative or corrective mindsets when trying to learn. These mindsets are especially troubling for students in writing classes, where errors must be made in order for students to grow and develop.

Another problem with grading, Brian Huot notes in *(Re) Articulating Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning,* is that it rarely communicates anything of value to students. When I take a narrative that a student has written in one of my courses—something that has evolved through several drafts and has greatly improved—and I tell that student the paper is an 85%, what am I saying? 85% of what? Am I saying the narrative is in the top 85% of the class, the top 85% of narratives written by all college freshmen in the U.S., or in the top 85% of all the narratives I've ever read? Or maybe I'm comparing what was executed in the narrative to a rubric, and I'm suggesting the student met 85% of the objectives on the rubric, such as effective dialogue, strong verbs, and detailed description. But might a narrative that uses all three objectives still be a poorly written narrative?

The breakdown of communication inherent in this kind of *summative-only*, end-of-the-paper/project grading is a grave issue. As a case in point, Liesel K. O'Hagan and colleagues demonstrate the lack of useful information gleaned by students when grading is implemented in a classroom. As a part of the study, one student wrote, "I don't even understand what the grade means on my paper. The top says something like a B and then all the comments say positive things and then there are all these errors marked. Then the person next to me wrote only half as much as I did and has even more errors marked and he got an A. It just doesn't make any sense to me."

So why are we still so dependent on grading? The simplest answer is growth in student numbers. Education used to be only for the wealthy and privileged. That changed at the start of the 20th century, and continues through our present time with such acts as mandatory attendance laws, the GI Bill, and the growth of open-enrollment colleges. As student numbers and diversity rose in the classroom, the models of grading we use today came to fruition, and those that had been used before were relegated to near obscurity. However, it might be in the past where we can find the answers to the present question: If grading writing is counterproductive, what else can we do?

The grading process in place before the late 19th century hinged more on direct contact between student work, course content, the student, and the teacher. For example, in English classes, teachers would respond to student writing in both written and spoken form. There were many levels of communication between the student and teacher, which provided more opportunity for the student to gain an understanding and command of course content. In addition, a student's success depended on demonstrating the skills taught. If students could demonstrate the necessary skills (reading, writing, or speaking) then, and only then, did they pass the course. This more attentive and interactive approach is akin to what occurs in *assessment*.

Assessment and grading are not synonymous. Grading is a silent, one-way evaluation, where a teacher assigns a letter, rife with a set of socio-cultural significances, to a piece of student writing. Assessment, on the other hand, provides the opportunity for two kinds of evaluation—formative and summative.

Formative evaluation—done typically by responding to in-process student writing several times during the semester—replaces the punishment or praise of student learning, typically demonstrated

through grading a final product or test, with a process that encourages communication as a part of learning. When using formative evaluation, teachers and students speak with one another often. In addition, formative evaluation creates safe spaces for student learning because students are not focused on trying to avoid failure but, instead, are searching for insight and growth. As grades lose their power, the desire to evade punishment or failure can dissolve into the desire to seek knowledge and learn something new. Finally, because of the communicative nature of formative evaluation, students develop the capacity to talk about and, in some instances, even teach the material themselves as they work with their peers to explain what they know.

Summative evaluation follows extensive formative evaluation. Summative evaluation is superior to grading because it assesses a student's ability to meet *a priori* criteria without the use of a letter grade. Summative evaluation methods such as student self-reflection on the learning process, ungraded portfolio assessment, and contract grading all provide the opportunity for teachers to assess and respond to student learning free of the socio-political, socio-economic letter grade.

Unfortunately, like most teachers, I have to provide grades in the summative sense. If I don't submit a letter grade at the end of a semester, I will not have a job. But providing end-of-semester grades doesn't preclude providing formative assessment that can help students revise a text or project so they will better understand why they might receive an 85% as a final grade. If I had a choice by my institution whether to provide summative grades, however, I wouldn't do it again. In short, the enterprise of grading student writing should be replaced by a combination of formative and summative evaluation.

Further Reading

To learn more about grading, assessment, and higher education, read Stephen Tchudi's *Alternatives to Grading Student Writing*, Brian Huot's *(Re)Articulating Writing Assessment*, and William Glasser's *Schools Without Failure*. If looking for the most contemporary material on the subject of grading in education, consult the work of Mark Barnes, who has published a number of books such as *Assessment 3.0* and has an intriguing TED Talk on the need to eliminate grading altogether. Carnegie Mellon University's Assess Teaching and Learning website also contains informative definitions for and practices of assessment techniques.

Keywords

assessment, formative assessment, grading, grading alternatives, summative assessment

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