

Consider this . . .



Standards-Based Grading

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The continuous challenge for educators is to know whether our students are really learning. Are they gaining competency in the necessary knowledge and skills that we are attempting to convey or is it all just disseminated information looking for a home? Just as important, how can our students know if they're really learning? The commonplace default systems of assessment are to administer another test, assign additional homework, or to simply assume that since it's been taught, it's been caught. But what do these methods really show us about student learning—very little. Unless we are able to provide ourselves and our students with accurate and essential feedback, then it becomes incumbent upon us to explore new assessment methods.

Consider this, Standards-Based Grading

One assessment theory that's been gaining ground is called **standards-based grading**. Standards-based grading is a highly effective system to evaluate your students' learning and to advance them to higher levels of proficiency. What is standards-based grading? It "involves assessing a student's competency with specific topics and standards within each subject area. In standards-based grading, students only begin to work on higher levels of knowledge and skill in a subject area once they have demonstrated competence, or proficiency, at lower levels. . . . In a standards-based system, a student can demonstrate mastery of a set of standards and move to a more challenging set of standards."¹

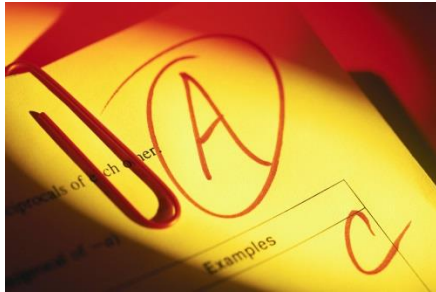
Benefits of Standards-Based Grading

What are the practical benefits to this approach? There is a growing body of evidence that schools which have implemented standards-based grading have demonstrated positive academic gains and a transformation of their school culture.

One highly significant benefit to standards-based grading is that students are able to assume ownership for their learning as they become personally invested in acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary for advancement. In this system, students receive "concrete guidance and useful feedback that they can use to improve their performance in specific areas."² "Students are able to practice their mastery of standards without the penalty of receiving a poor grade in the gradebook."³ By understanding exactly what they need in order to master a subject's knowledge and skills, students can work in collaboration with teachers and other students to accomplish their goals.

Another reported benefit is that grades and homework take on significant and definable meanings in the sequence of learning because they become applicable to assessment standards. If

we're honest with ourselves, what do most grading systems really mean? What's the difference between an "A" a "B"? What do percentages and averages represent? What do extraneous factors such as effort and attitude tell us about a student's mastery of knowledge and skills? Standards-based grading takes the mystery out the equation by providing objective meaning to knowledge and skills.



A couple supplementary benefits are: as teachers receive valuable formative assessments about their students evidence of learning, instruction can be appropriately adjusted and intervention strategies for struggling students can be modified, and an emphasis on quality of work versus quantity. This is a vital expectation in the workplace where knowledge and skill standards must be met in order to advance.⁴

Implementing Standards-Based Grading

So how can you implement a standards-based grading system? First, let's be realistic; it's going to require a lot of work. Aligning content and curriculum to standards demands careful thought and organization. The degree of work will vary depending on whether you're attempting to implement this in a district, school, department, or as an individual teacher. Another important consideration, this will entail changing the mindsets of colleagues, parents, and students—maybe the greatest hurdle.

There are two essential implementation requirements for a standards-based grading system—the **establishment of the standards** and a **rubric system**. Well-defined and comprehensive sets of standards based upon the knowledge and skills determined for student proficiency in a subject area are foundational. It must also clearly indicate to students how they are measuring up to those standards. This is the most important and the most difficult aspect of implementing a standards-based grading system. The grading and reporting must be criterion-referenced instead of norm-referenced. Norm-referenced grading compares students against other students. In a criterion-referenced system, “teachers . . . must identify what they want their students to learn and be able to do and what evidence they will use to judge that achievement or performance. Grades based on clearly stated learning criteria have direct meaning and communicate that meaning.”⁵

“A crucial consideration in identifying learning goals or standards is determining the degree of specificity. Standards that are too specific make reporting forms cumbersome to use and difficult to understand. Standards that are too broad or general, however, make it hard to identify students' unique strengths and weaknesses. . . .The standards must be broad enough to allow for efficient communication of student learning, yet specific enough to be useful.”⁶

Some questions to consider are:

1. What do my students need to understand in order to be ready for the next level?

2. When I give my students a passing grade, what should that mean they have accomplished?
3. What skills should my students be building even if they aren't expected to fully master them?⁷

The second implementation step is to develop a rubric system indicating the student's level of progress with regards to the standards. Numeral marks with indicators seem to be the most utilized method. For example, a **1, 2, 3, or 4** could correspond with **beginning, developing/progressing, proficient, or exceptional/advanced**.

Possible interpretations of the rubric markers could be:

1. **Beginning**- student has not yet demonstrated competence on a significant number of standards assessed or 2.29 and below.
2. **Developing/Progressing**- student has partially demonstrated competence on most standards assessed or between 2.30 and 2.99.
3. **Proficient**- student has demonstrated competence on most standards assessed or between 3.00 and 3.49.
4. **Exceptional/Advanced**- student has thoroughly demonstrated knowledge on most standards assessed or between 3.50 and 4.00.

Creating a rubric that specifies what each level of proficiency involves for each standard could be helpful. Students would receive a number of scores that represent their proficiency in multiple knowledge and skill areas of assessment because of the focus on individual concepts instead of a single overall grade.

Once these two essential implementation requirements are completed, you can determine the types of formative and summative assessments to develop.

Personal Applications

As an ESL instructor, several practical applications for standards-based grading in my courses are apparent. Some of my students in Brazil are preparing for eventual entrance into U.S. schools, and they are studying in order to function at grade upon admission. By accessing Common Core standards for their respective grade levels, I'm able to build appropriate standards and a surrounding curriculum.

In addition, ESL courses are natural selections for this type of assessment system because of their very clear standards in the areas of vocabulary, grammar, conversation, recognition, etc. This is occurs regardless of the level of fluency.

For you, how do you think that you can apply standards-based grading to your teaching?

Endnotes

- ¹ Heflebower, T., Hoegh, J. K., & Warrick, P. (2014). *A School Leader's Guide to Standards-Based Grading*. Bloomington, IN: Marzano Research, pp. 3-4.
- ² Heflebower. (2014) p. 10.
- ³ Work, J. (December 4, 2014) 3 Peaks and 3 Pits of Standards-Based Grading. Retrieved from <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/peaks-pits-standards-based-grading-josh-work>.
- ⁴ Scriffiny, P. (October 2008) Seven reasons for standards-based grading. *Educational Leadership*. Volume 66, Number 2, pp. 70-74.
- ⁵ Guskey, T. (September 2001) Helping standards make the grade. *Educational Leadership*. Volume 59, Number 1, p. 20.
- ⁶ Guskey. (2001) p. 23
- ⁷ (2013) Getting Started with Standards-Based Grading. Retrieved from <http://activegrade.com/get-started/>

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Michael S. VanHook is Executive Director and a teacher at the MSV Educational Network in Londrina, Parana, Brazil. The MSV Educational Network **seeks to** deliver exceptional educational experiences to enrich our clients' lifestyles and opportunities. We strive to make a significant and enduring difference in our clients' development and advancement by applying proven methods of instruction and success. For more information visit www.msveducationalnetwork.com.

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