

# The 1 Grades Game

Most grading systems reward students for their behavior, not whether they've mastered the material.

**T** Changing to a grading system that bases grades on mastery enables teachers to give students regular, specific feedback about their learning.

The high school conference room is full of adults and one teenager, Amy. Evenly distributed around the table are the math teacher, Amy's parents, an assistant principal, a special education teacher, Amy, and the principal. Such meetings are almost never held to applaud the successes of the student, and this one is no exception. The topics today are Amy's failing math grade and questionable graduation status. The most uncomfortable person in the room is also the youngest, perhaps because she knows exactly what is coming. Here's the funny thing: everybody in the room knows what discussion is about to take place. And although this is really not funny, everybody also has a pretty good idea that an identical meeting will be needed in the future.

As you no doubt have already guessed, the focus of the meeting is the contents of Amy's grade report, particularly the category labeled "Homework." Amy, it seems, had not been doing any homework, and as a direct result, she failed several quizzes and tests. Amy, the adults agree, is perfectly capable of doing well in math if she would only apply herself. The person in question, driven to end this meeting as quickly as possible and with the fewest consequences as possible, also agrees. So it is settled: Amy will do her homework, apply herself, and everything will work out fine. Hands are shaken, friendly goodbyes spoken, and everyone goes on about their business.

Fast forward one month: another meeting with the same players and the same script. Such meetings are conducted daily across the United States, and only a tiny minority makes any worthwhile change in the success level of the student. The fault for such failure does not fall at the feet of the students, but rather at the feet of teachers and



## Resources



As you begin to evaluate your grading system, the following resources will help you build your own knowledge of good grading and assessment practices.

**A Repair Kit for Grading: 15 Fixes for Broken Grades** by Ken O'Connor (2007, Educational Testing Service) is an excellent starting point that helps readers focus on specific aspects of grading.

**Classroom Assessment for Student Learning** by Rick Stiggins, Judy Arter, Jan Chappuis, and Steve Chappuis (2004, Assessment Training Institute) gives an overall perspective on what it means to develop assessments that are focused on providing students with specific feedback for improvement and offers a detailed step-by-step process on implementing good assessments.

**Grades Don't Matter** by Tony Donen, Jennifer Anton, Lisa Beard, Todd Stinson, and Glenda Sullivan (2010, Armour&Armour Publications) is an easy read with real examples and testimonies of what it looks like when theory is put into practice.

administrators who are giving such poor advice to improve performance. Imagine observing an inexperienced teacher who has poor classroom management skills and delivers unengaging lessons. What advice would you give him or her in a post-observation meeting? Would you tell him to work harder, to do more planning at home, to apply himself more to the job? Of course not. You would identify specific areas of strengths and weaknesses and offer practical, specific advice that will improve his or her teaching.

In regards to improving performance, students are no different than adults. Amy did not need to be told to work harder, primarily because she didn't know what to focus on. Instead of vague, behavior-based remedies, she needed specific, learning-based remedies. Instead of a "work harder" treatment, she needed a "come in for extra help on solving equations" treatment. When told to focus on specific areas, students will succeed at a much higher rate than when they are offered overly general and nonspecific feedback, such

as, "You need to pay more attention in class." The goal, then, is to communicate specific, learning-based feedback in a student-friendly manner, and the best method of communication is in grade reports that use a learning-based or standards-based gradebook.

### Learning, not Behavior

If you like a challenge, take a look at a typical grade report of a typical student in a typical class in your school and try to decipher what he or she is good at and what he or she is bad at. Some things are easy to find out—he doesn't do homework, she doesn't study for tests, he misses a lot of school. Some things, with a bit of imagination, can be presumed—it's easy to tell that she cheats on homework because her homework grade is good but she fails all the tests. Or that he is bored because he never does his homework, but he aces all the tests.

To take the challenge to the next level, look back at what you said were strengths and weaknesses and see how many were behavior-related as opposed to learning-related.

- Doesn't do homework (behavior)
- Doesn't study (behavior)
- Misses school a lot (behavior)
- Cheats on homework (behavior).

### Bored Behavior

It can be quite alarming (and eye-opening) to see exactly how many of the grades students receive are based on their behaviors rather than their learning. If you are teaching U.S. History, shouldn't your students' grades be determined by how much they know about the subject and how they use the subject to solve problems? If your answer is yes, then how can such assignments as word searches and defining key terms from the book affect their overall grades?

Students should be assessed on what they know and can use rather than on their behavior. The reality, unfortunately, is that the opposite is often the case. Grades for students who work hard are frequently inflated, and when performance is essential, such as on high-stakes assessments, students fall short and use the excuse that they are poor test takers. Also, although grades that are based on behaviors reward the hardworkers and those students who are forever compliant, they punish students who have yet to figure out how to "do school." To alleviate this inequity, schools must change their grading practices. Fortunately, one simple change is all that is needed to start the ball rolling.

### Changing the Game

Tommy Jenkins and Mary Smith are students in Honors Precalculus, and both of them show a 78% as their current grade. One might assume that they are similar students. As you dig deeper into their grade reports (and thus their teacher's gradebook), you get a good feel for Tommy but not so much for Mary. (See figures 1 and 2.) It is plain to see that Tommy does not understand "Domain and Range"



or “Graphing Trig Functions.” If he needed or wanted to bring his grade up, he could focus his attention on those topics.

It is difficult to do the same sort of analysis for Mary. She seems to have done poorly in chapter 1 and had a bad homework grade for chapter 4, but does that give Mary any hints as to what to do to improve her grade? The likelihood is that although the teacher can explain to anyone exactly what chapter 1 was about, Mary cannot. If Mary cannot verbalize what topics chapter 1 covered, how can she possibly be expected to improve?

To facilitate the move to learning-based grades, schools must tinker with their gradebooks. First, grades should be categorized by topics or units tied to course content. This is a departure from the old “tests, quizzes, homework” model, but it is a simple change to make. In fact, this change can be made at the beginning of any grading period in any subject in the school. Instead of “tests, 50%,” the gradebook will list “functions and graphs, 50%.”

This simple modification creates radical changes in and out of the classroom. Outside the classroom, conversations with students and parents begin to deviate from the format that Amy’s teachers and administrators used in their meeting with her and incorporate more detail and more specific instructions on how to improve. “Work harder” becomes “work harder on understanding the causes of World War II” and “pay more attention in class” becomes “you need to be able to discuss the steps of photosynthesis.” These changes foster an environment of assistance and learning, rather than resentment and frustration. No one wants to fail, but no one wants to guess as to how to pass. Specifics that are based on learning targets are key to this culture change.

Inside the classroom, teachers are forced to evaluate their assignments and grades. If an assignment is to be graded, it must be categorized according to learning. If the assignment cannot be properly categorized, the teacher must reconfigure the assignment so that it can. This change in thinking is subtle but dramatic. Over time, teachers learn to think about individual questions on individual assessments and what category each should be recorded in. Under the old system, a test is marked, totaled, changed to a percentage, and recorded. Under the new system, one assessment might have several individual grades because the test covers topics in multiple categories.

### The Grades Game

In sports, players have to go through a well-known sequence: practice, scrimmage, game. Practice occurs regularly for players to hone their skills and improve flaws in their game. They receive individual as well as group instruction, and failures are learning experiences. In scrimmages, game conditions are mimicked and players get the opportunity to apply what they learned in practices in a game situation. In scrimmages, players show improvement—or don’t. Although their performance might affect their playing time, the results ultimately don’t affect the team. In the game, all the practicing and

Figure 1

Student: Mary Smith		Average	78%
Class: Pre-calculus Honors			
Tests and Projects 40%			
Assignment	Points Possible	Points Earned	
Chapter 1 Test	100	68	
Chapter 4 Test	100	79	
Chapter 5 Test	100	74	
Transformations Project	100	95	
Average		79.00%	
Quizzes 30%			
Assignment	Points Possible	Points Earned	
Chapter 1 Quiz A	100	55	
Chapter 1 Quiz B	100	80	
Chapter 4 Quiz A	100	74	
Chapter 4 Quiz B	100	75	
Chapter 5 Quiz A	100	88	
Chapter 5 Quiz B	100	65	
Average		74.40%	
Homework 30%			
Assignment	Points Possible	Points Earned	
Chapter 1 Homework	10 assignments	100	100
Chapter 4 Homework	10 assignments	100	50
Chapter 5 Homework	10 assignments	100	70
Participation		100	100
Average		80.00%	

Figure 2

Student: Tommy Jenkins		Average	78%
Class: Pre-calculus Honors			
Functions and Graphs 15%			
Assignment	Points Possible	Points Earned	
Functions and 1-to-1	12	12	
Inverse	14	11	
Domain and Range	11	2	
Transformations	14	14	
Asymptotes	9	8	
Category Average		78.33%	
Trigonometric Functions 40%			
Assignment	Points Possible	Points Earned	
Angles	16	15	
Arc Length	5	5	
Solving Right Triangles	18	16	
Graphing Trig Functions	16	4	
Solving Trig Equations	14	12	
Category Average		75.36%	
Analytical Trigonometry 45%			
Assignment	Points Possible	Points Earned	
Verifying Trig Identities	18	8	
Sum and Difference Identities	6	6	
Law of Sines	12	12	
Law of Cosines	12	12	
Applications of Laws of Sines and Cosines	16	13	
Category Average		79.69%	

scrimmaging time is drawn upon, and the team lines it up for real. The result is final, and the performance is generally analyzed and evaluated and used when developing practices in the future.

A similar model will work for academics. Practice, in school, includes homework and classwork. This is where teachers instruct and students use that instruction to solve problems or draw conclusions or make connections. Teachers use practice to gauge progress and prepare for the future. Next are the scrimmages—“quizzes”—that enable the

teacher to check the pulse of the class. Quizzes shouldn't define a student's success or failure, but should instead be a barometer for both the teacher and the student about the progress being made.

After scrimmaging (and discussing the successes and failures of the scrimmage), it's time for a game, or test. Tests matter because they are opportunities for students to show exactly what they can and can't do, what they do and don't understand, what they know and don't know. Ideally, like in sports, practicing and scrimmaging have prepared students for the game (test), and the results can almost be predicted. In sports, practice and scrimmage are essential pieces to success, but in the end no one really cares about the athletes' practice habits or scrimmage performance. The only thing that matters is how well they play the game. In school, how much should we really care about students' homework habits or performance on quizzes? They are important, yes. They should be used to help the students, absolutely. But they should not affect students' grades.

## Conclusion

Teachers and administrators realize that grades are a game and that often the winners are those students who do the most work. But quantity should not trump quality. Grades should be based on what students know and can do, rather than on how much work they can (and will) complete. Students should receive regular and specific feedback about what they know and don't know. Offering regular, specific feedback and grading that are based on learning and not behavior will have an immediate positive impact on your school. It will redefine students' role in the learning process, completely alter communication patterns with students and parents, and ultimately will improve performance top to bottom. **PL**

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