

1 It's Broken—Fix It!

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Winning points may be the final goal of classroom work as it is in the sports endeavor, but the grade, like the final score of the game, never taught anyone how to win again, or why they lost.

—Lucas, "Writing Portfolios" 2

Would a company like IBM keep producing a computer model if research demonstrated that their machine made the consumer's work harder and ruined all confidence in the process? Would consumers continue to keep these obsolete and impractical machines in their homes and at their businesses? The answer is, of course, no. No major corporation would refuse to make decisions for change and continue to market an inferior product. Why, then, would the educational system continue to use such an obsolete machine as grading? Despite years and years and piles and piles of research showing that grading is not helpful and is, at times, harmful, educators and institutions continue to sum up students' knowledge and abilities by assigning a number or letter grade. So why do they continue to use these grade markers on student writing? One of the answers lies in tradition.

Grading: No New Process, No New Complaints

The educational practice of grading emerged relatively recently, approximately 1850, and it was challenged almost as soon as it became widely used. Grading became part of the system in the late nineteenth century as the nation grew and legislators passed mandatory attendance laws that resulted in a larger and more diverse student body. In his detailed history of the grading system, Thomas Guskey explains that by the early 1900s, the original practice of writing down skills that students had mastered had given way to the use of percentages to certify accomplishments in particular subjects. Though elementary teach-

ers continued to use written descriptions to document student learning, high school teachers found the number of students too large and instead moved to percentages. No one questioned the move to percentages because of the increasing demands on high school teachers.

Yet, studies as early as 1912 questioned the validity of grading, suggesting that in writing instruction, in particular, grades were far too subjective (Ellsworth and Willson 188). In a study done just twelve years after the introduction of percentages to student work, Starch and Elliot suggested that grades were not a reliable measure of student achievement (Guskey 18). They studied papers written in 142 different first-year high school English classes. The teachers assigned a wide range of scores to two essays, with one being scored on the basis of neatness, spelling, and punctuation and the other being scored on the basis of how well the paper communicated its message. Using a 0–100 percent grading scale, 15 percent of teachers gave one of the papers a failing mark while 12 percent gave the same paper a score of 90 or above. The other paper received scores ranging from 50 to 97 (Guskey 18).

In 1913, critics of Starch and Elliot's study suggested that writing is naturally subjective—therefore the initial study was flawed. Attempting to find a more objective topic, Starch and Elliot repeated their study by using geometry papers and found an even larger discrepancy, with scores on one paper ranging from 28 to 95 percent. Some teachers based their scores only on right and wrong answers, while others considered neatness, form, and spelling. Both studies raised questions about the subjectivity of grading (Guskey 18).

Several other changes in grading took place in the years following Starch and Elliot's challenge to percentage grades. In 1918, the current practice of using five categories—excellent, good, average, poor, and failing, with corresponding letters of A, B, C, D, and F—first appeared. Grading on the curve became popular in the 1930s, as educators attempted to make grades less subjective. With this practice, the most common grade was C, with grades being distributed along a normal probability curve. Some teachers even went so far as to decide in advance just how many of each grade would be awarded.

Between 1925 and 1938, at the height of the progressive education movement and in response to the controversy over grading and reporting, some schools abolished grading completely and returned to verbal descriptions of student achievement. Others adopted pass/fail systems, and still others attempted a mastery approach similar to the

practices of earlier assessment. But most schools continued the traditional system of percentages in grading.

There have also been periodic attempts to defend grading. For example, in 1958, Ellis Page conducted a study which showed that students who received a score with individualized comments did better on their next assignment, while students who received only a score and grade did not. The study suggested that grades could have a beneficial effect when paired with individualized comments (Guskey 18).

Yet, from the early part of the century, researchers and educators have questioned the validity of grading, and it is clear that the challenge will continue into the twenty-first century. Despite extensive research, educators are no more successful at grading in the current system of education than they were a century and a half ago (Guskey 14–19).

Schools Teaching Failure

William Glasser claims that no child becomes a failure until he or she reaches school. In *Schools without Failure*, his classic statement of this thesis, Glasser explains how failure works against the process of education:

The preschool-age child lives in an environment largely devoid of labels, scoring categories, or other classification systems, allowing him to develop according to standards set by himself. In such an environment there is no such thing as a “failure.” Everyday life experiences have no structures for pinning labels on individuals, they have no set standards to be met, [and] they do not prescribe particular forms of thinking or select arbitrarily what is to be “learned” or committed to memory. (xiv)

Once a student is identified as a “failure,” the continuing experience with failure lowers motivation. All school activities, from memorizing facts to critical thinking, seem irrelevant, especially once it is obvious that the chances for success are slim. School becomes irrelevant, since the child views it as a hostile environment. Even a passing score that is less than an A implies a degree of failure. This process of labeling a child a failure begins and ends with grades, and, as Glasser observes, it begins very early in a child’s educational career.

Glasser argues for a nongraded elementary school. There have been schools of this sort in the past, and some elementary schools today are essentially nongraded. Despite fears that without grades students will not be motivated to work and parents will not know how

their child is performing, research has shown that in a nongraded atmosphere, students are motivated without grades, and at the same time, their self-esteem is preserved. In this environment, fewer children are retained, and it appears beneficial for African Americans, boys, underachievers, and high-risk groups. These children do not have the chance to learn failure as do students in a graded school (Pavan 334).

What the Research Shows about Grades

In my ERIC search of over 1,500 journal articles on grading published since 1963, I found only a handful that attempted to defend the use of traditional grading practices. In "Boxed In by Grades," Howard Kirschenbaum summarizes the major criticisms of grades. Current and past research supports his observations; therefore, I will use his statements to serve as the skeleton for the survey of what research says to the teacher about grading, especially of writing.

Scientific Invalidity

"Grades are unscientific, subjective, and seldom related to clearly stated educational objectives" (Kirschenbaum 46). A grade, especially on a piece of student writing, suggests that there are very specific and precise criteria on which the student has been graded. This grade, especially if it is rendered in the form of points or a percentage, suggests that there is a measurable difference between the given grade or the one below or above: 98 or 96 percent, C+ or C-. The grade implies that all papers in any classroom that receive a particular grade are of equal quality. In *Response and Analysis: Teaching Literature in Junior and Senior High School*, Robert Probst suggests that

a grade indicates a precision of evaluation that may not be possible. A grade may conceal other evaluative information that might be more useful to students and parents and trains them to accept an alphabetic or numerical symbol instead of useful information about literacy processes. (318)

In a 1977 study, Randolph Ellsworth and Don Willson questioned whether grades were highly related to student aptitude. The study examined correlations between eight grade-aptitude scores of students and the school grades obtained a year later. They found that the *higher* the average aptitude score for the classes, the *lower* the average grade point for the class and vice versa. They concluded by puzzling over this inverse relationship, adding: "Thus, a few more per-

sons are wondering how much longer education can continue to place so much interest, value, and faith in letter grades. But then we all know what a grade of C means, do we not?" (Ellsworth and Willson 188–89).

As we have seen, studies from the early 1900s to the present have shown that any given composition can receive a range of scores from A through F. Teachers apply different criteria for grading writing, which means that an A can never have universal meaning. Canady and Hotchkiss point out that teachers have varying grading scales, and there are inconsistencies in application:

A grade of 90 may have a totally different meaning in one place than in another. What constitutes failure in your school district may be totally different in mine. As teachers we may change our scale from day to day or from grading period to grading period. (Jongsma 318)

Guskey also discredits the notion that a grade is a scientific measure, addressing the fact that in a 100-point system, there are nine points of difference within a grade range. For instance, in order to earn a B, students must score between an 80 and an 89. Yet a student scoring a 79 earns a grade of C. The question is whether or not the teacher can point out the one-percent or even eleven-percent skill difference between the C and the B, a problem that the addition of pluses and minuses merely masks (Guskey 18).

By far the greatest problem with grades being unscientific is that they do not, therefore, provide a student with useful information. In 1995, Robert Lerner, Marsha Urban, and I conducted a survey on attitudes about grading, attempting to find out what role grading played in shaping students' views of themselves as writers. The survey was given to students ranging in age from thirteen to college level. In response to a question about understanding and learning from grades, one college 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.

If it doesn't make any sense to this obviously bright student, who is the grade for?

False Motivation

Another criticism of grades observed by Kirschenbaum is that "pupils learn to perform for the grade and as a result, show less initiative, independence, self-motivation, and creativity" (46). Teachers nationwide hear the question "Is this for a grade?" when they give an assignment. This question implies that students might not do the assignment if not for the grade.

In his article "What Does Grading Mean, Anyway?" John Presley explains how he worked to help his writing students realize the true motivation for getting an education by eliminating letter grades from their papers. He explained his low opinion of grades to a college composition class and informed them that he would not be putting letter grades on their writing. Students did not respond positively at first to this "wait and see" approach. Presley found that when the students got their papers back, instead of looking at the grade and tossing the paper aside, they actually read the comments and attempted to understand what would make their papers better. Throughout the semester, Presley refused to label the writing with a grade. Instead, he held conferences in which he asked his students to assign and defend a grade for the paper. He found that students' opinions of their work was usually in line with his own and that instead of discussing the grade, "real information was being exchanged....The students did not see themselves in a passive role before an arbitrary judge" (14). He repeatedly pointed out to his students that his class was just one composition class and that the students would continue to become better writers with every paper they wrote. He explained that his class was intended for learning and that a grade would not say whether they had taken anything from the experience. Presley says:

I'm not allowing my students to use grades as a substitute for the reward of understanding. I think they are discovering that learning need not cease at graduation, the time those pesky little symbols finally disappear from their lives. (14)

Letter and number grading affects student writing by taking away a student's independence and creativity. According to Robert Meikle, grades affect the process of writing because students want to find out what is important to the teacher so that they can be rewarded with a good grade. Meikle explains:

The huge danger in the psychological and motivational effects of evaluation is that it pulls the learner's cognitive focus away

from himself and aims it at some outside authority figure. The learner engages with the authority and not with the intrinsic issues. The writer is guided, not by realistic considerations of meaning, structure, and audience, but by specific or assumed stipulations from an extrinsic source. (25–26)

Meikle conducted an attitude survey which showed overwhelmingly that the grade in a writing assignment was the prime source of students' interest in writing. Sixty-eight percent of students and 67 percent of the teachers surveyed felt that grades had become an essential ingredient if the students were to be motivated at all to do their best work. In a discussion of the value of grades, the comments Meikle received all indicated grades as being the sole motivator for performance. Geoff, a student, said, "The mark kind of hurts you in some ways, but in other ways it helps because it makes you do the essay." Gary, another student, agreed: "If there's no mark, I really can't get into doing it because, to me, why do something that's not worth anything?" (26–27).

Grades may motivate or scare students into doing all of their work, but the research suggests that poor grades do little to encourage students to do better. Researchers have found that many teachers use grades for punishment, despite the fact that studies have found that "failure or nonpromotion in school has negative effects on future academic achievement, self-concept, attitude toward school, behavior, and attendance" (Johnson 12). Instead of motivating students toward a better performance in the future, the failure suggests that what students are being asked to do cannot be done. Guskey supports the idea that grades serve no purpose as negative motivators:

Grades have some value as rewards, but no value as punishments. . . . Most students view high grades as positive recognition of their success, and some work hard to avoid the consequences of low grades. At the same time, no studies support the use of low grades as punishments. Instead of prompting greater effort, low grades usually cause students to withdraw from learning. To protect their self-image, many students may blame themselves for the low mark, but feel helpless to improve. (16)

False Indicators of Worth

Kirschenbaum adds that although they "are misleading and focus on only one aspect of the child, . . . pupils tend to develop feelings of self-worth consistent with their grades" (47). Grades in any subject can

influence what a student believes about his or her capabilities—especially in writing, where a student must open up a very private side in order to share writing. With every word, a student leaves a piece of himself or herself on the page. In order to grade any piece of writing, a teacher must judge the student. That judging is exactly what students objected to in Meikle's survey of attitudes about writing. Meikle adds that students "perceive grades on written assignments as a personal judgment on their character, their drive, and their worth" (19).

This problem with being judged was strongly reinforced by the attitude survey Lerner, Urban, and I conducted. We found that virtually all of the 150 students surveyed included comments that reflected either positive or negative feelings of self-esteem. For instance, in response to the statement "Grading represents how well I write," one eighth grader responded: "It has made me realize that I am terrible at it and I hate it." Many students responded that they felt they were either good or bad writers on the basis of their past grades. One college student wrote: "I feel I'm an average writer. I base this on grades I've received in English throughout the years." These feelings were obviously generated by the grade values rather than students' genuine achievement or rhetorical success.

Superficial Learning

In the research literature, grades have also been criticized by Kirschenbaum for promoting "superficial, spurious, and insincere scholarship" (48). He suggests that "when 'wad-ja-get?' becomes more important than 'wad-ja-learn?'" students are "boxed in" by grades (46). He says that students work only for the grade and not for what can be learned through an assignment. He illustrates how early this problem develops with the story of his niece. After seeing her kindergarten connect-the-dot paper marked with "100%," he asked his sister if the kids were actually being graded. She told him that, yes, they were graded, and shared a story. During the previous week, his niece had brought home a paper with a "1," which represented the number of items wrong. After looking over the paper, Kirschenbaum's sister found one question that the teacher had failed to mark. When she tried to point this out, his sister found that her daughter insisted on pointing to the 1 at the top of the page, that there was only one mistake. Even at her young age, it was not the learning opportunity that mattered to Kirschenbaum's niece—it was the mark.

Student/Teacher Barriers

Kirschenbaum also maintains that grades “form a barrier between students and teachers” that is counterproductive in the writing classroom (47). In that classroom, there must be a feeling of mutual trust and respect. A student must not feel threatened by or unsure of a teacher. If he or she is, this will create a reluctance to share writing with that teacher. It is important for students to realize that, as Presley told his students, the grade “is the carefully rendered opinion of one fallible man with some experience in the field of writing” (13). Instead, grades perpetuate the myth that the teacher has all the answers, and it is the students’ job to pick the right ones. Students believe that the teacher has the key to good writing and that they must match the ideas in the teacher’s head to get the good grade. This myth is perpetuated because students sense the arbitrary nature of the grade: “Grading criteria may be regarded as . . . mysterious, a function of teacher taste rather than a representation of inherent and tangible standards” (Jongsma 318). When students do not understand the criteria for grades and comments, they must make up the meaning, decide that the teacher had a good reason, or assume that they just won’t ever understand. There is also an idea of fairness involved. If a student feels a piece he or she has written is wonderful, yet it receives a poor grade, the student will cease to trust the teacher’s opinion as a reader.

Limits on Teaching and Teachers

Finally, Kirschenbaum criticizes grading because it “leads to uncreative teaching” (46). In an effort to make more sense out of grading, many teachers reduce assignments to what is measurable. It is much simpler to grade a multiple-choice test than an essay exam. The teacher sticks to the knowledge level of Bloom’s taxonomy, because there are right answers that are easily measured, rather than challenging students’ critical-thinking skills. In writing, it is easier to evaluate usage, spelling, and punctuation, so grading is often reduced to these. Jongsma writes:

While it may be easy to evaluate spelling and punctuation, these skills pale into insignificance beside the ability to create, to imagine, to relate one thought to another, to organize, to reason, or to catch the nuances of English prose. Inventing, reasoning, responding, and reflecting do not readily lend themselves to the testing or grading usually required by school districts and reported on most report cards. (318)

The activities that really allow students to have fun and to think are not easily measured or graded.

In short, piles upon piles of research suggest that grading definitely does not help students and, in many cases, may even hurt them. Grading is a practice that came under fire almost as soon as it was invented. Why, then, have we subjected students to this invalid practice for almost two hundred years? Will students continue to be subjected to it for the next two hundred years? Would IBM continue to market a product that did not perform its intended task? If it planned on succeeding, I think not.

The 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... (Tjarks 3)

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Interlude

The entire educational establishment is a house of straw built upon the grading system. If mommies and daddies didn't give children quarters for A's in elementary school, if secondary teachers didn't issue threats about bad grades and a dim future to their students, if colleges and universities didn't scare the hell out of everybody with their GPAs, then the entire institution would collapse in a tangle of arms, legs, minds, and educational chaff.

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