

Weighing and Choosing Alternatives

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Stephen Tchudi (introduced on the Editor page) chaired the NCTE Committee on Alternatives to Grading Student Writing.

Introduction and Aims

This workshop will help you and your colleagues to evaluate your present grading system and to develop and evaluate alternatives. Because it's important to base change solidly in educational theory, I suggest that you read or reread the introductory essays in this collection to square away your pedagogical beliefs and commitments. Through this workshop you can

- examine your current system and assess its strengths and weaknesses;
- study alternative grading plans and assess their possible strengths, drawbacks, and implementation problems;
- create a series of trials to explore the effects of alternatives to grading student writing in your classroom, school, or district.

Resources

In This Volume

McDonnell, Charles. Chapter 14: "Total Quality: A Farewell to Grades."

Nelson, Marie Wilson. Chapter 2: "Growth-Biased Assessing of Writers—A More Democratic Choice."

O'Hagan, Liesel K. Chapter 1: "It's Broken—Fix It!"

Tchudi, Stephen. "Introduction: Degrees of Freedom in Assessment, Evaluation, and Grading."

Other Resources

Kirschenbaum, Howard, Rodney Napier, and Sidney B. Simon. *Wad-Ja-Get? The Grading Game in American Education*. New York: Hart, 1971. [A must-read classic in the field.]

Knowles, Malcolm S. *Using Learning Contracts*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1986.

"Reporting What Students Are Learning." *Educational Leadership* 52:2 (Oct. 1994). [An entire issue devoted to a discussion of alternative grading and reporting systems.]

Discussion Topics

- What grading systems do teachers currently use in your school or district? What dissatisfaction is there with them? In what ways do they satisfactorily serve your needs? Why, in the end, do teachers want to explore alternatives to grading student writing?
- Review the research on grading (see both O'Hagan and Nelson). To what extent do your experiences support, extend, or run contrary to the research?
- Have the teachers in your school or district explored alternatives to grading? Has anyone worked with variations of pass/fail? Contracts? Point systems? Rubrics and scoring guides? What do they find to be the strengths and weaknesses of each?
- Discuss grading alternatives in terms of current composition theory. In what ways are the current systems (both traditional and alternative) consistent with what your group takes to be the best current knowledge about writing? Which systems provide the greatest number of degrees of freedom for teachers to be consistent with the research and helpful to students?

Activities

- With courage and caution, bring in student papers that teachers in your group have responded to and/or graded. Carefully study the comments. What are their purposes? What sort of instructional philosophy do they reveal? Study the link with grades. Is there a correlation between instruction and grading? (With even greater courage, supplement this activity by having students write about what they learned from those particular comments and the grade.)
- Review the articles in Part II of this book to create a list of grading alternatives that seem interesting or attractive to your group (see also the summary chart in the introduction to this volume). What problems does each of these systems purport to solve? What do you anticipate to be the practical problems with each?
- Then design a series of trials of alternative systems. Members of your group might each agree to try a system for, say, one

marking period. Or individual teachers might want to try a different system each marking period for a semester or a year. Of course, people should only test out systems that they see as particularly interesting or attractive.

In the spirit of the teacher as researcher, keep accurate data on these trials. In a logbook, each teacher might write

- *Preliminary aims and reflections.* What do you want to learn from this trial? How do you think the new system has potential for solving traditional grading problems?
- *The plan.* Document the design and implementation of the system: introducing it to the students, the ground rules and mechanics (how papers are collected, marked, returned to students—don't trust this to memory).
- *Reflections on various efforts.* What happened the first, second, or fifth time you used this system? What seemed to work well? What were the problems? In particular, what were the unanticipated (Murphy's Law!) side effects or complications?
- *Comments on sample papers.*
- *Assessment of student responses and reactions.* Ask your students to write about the new system. Does it seem fair and equitable to them? Did it give them the kind of feedback they needed? How would they change or modify it?
- *Reflections and recommendations.* If you were doing the trial again, how would you modify it? Is this a system that could work broadly in your school or district? What advice would you give to teachers implementing it? (See especially Charles McDonnell's report of how he developed, implemented, and evaluated his "total quality" assessment system.)

Follow-up

- Continue the grading trials for a reasonable time period. Continue to meet to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each alternative approach.
- Discuss grading alternatives with teachers at the grade levels above and below you. To what extent do grading systems represent and accurately describe student achievement? What sorts of grading alternatives could lead to improved articulation and reporting among levels.
- Explore combinations of grading systems. Develop and give trial runs to these new systems. Could you, for example, combine a pass/fail writing system with graded work in other areas of the language arts? Can contract learning be done pass/fail? Can point systems be combined with rubrics

and scoring sheets? Remember that no alternative system is a panacea to the problems induced by the grading system. Keep on searching!

- Write an account of your grading trials and submit it to *Language Arts*, *English Journal*, or *College English*.