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Can grades be an effective form of feedback?

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***When grades are used in the right way, at the right time,
and for the right reasons, they can be useful to students.***



Getty

Grades are portrayed as a villain by many in education today. Some researchers and authors contend grades stifle creativity, foster fear of failure, and weaken students' interest (Pulfrey, Buchs, & Butera, 2011). Others argue that grades diminish students' emotional and behavioral engagement in learning (Poorthuis et al., 2015). These claims have led some to believe that we could significantly improve students' attitudes, their interest in learning, and the classroom learning environment simply by going "gradeless" (Barnes, 2018; Burns & Frangiosa, 2021; Kohn, 1994, 1999; Spencer, 2017).

But do grades deserve the supervillain label? Would eliminating grades suddenly increase students' interest in learning and make our classrooms better places to learn? Not much evidence supports this. In fact, careful examination of the research reveals the findings are far more nuanced.

We know, for example, that students' feelings about grades and how grades affect them depend on the purpose and meaning attached to grades. Their interpretations vary depending on how the grades are determined, the students' grade level and background, and classroom learning conditions (Guskey, 2019). Students' perceptions of grades and their follow-up actions also vary depending on the grade they receive (Link & Guskey, 2019).

In addition, we know that grades often are misused. Some teachers use grades to reward students for complying with academic or behavioral expectations or to punish students for not following classroom procedures.

But if we use grades the right way, at the right time, and for the right reasons, they can be an effective form of feedback for students. To guarantee their proper use and avoid their misuse, however, we need to be sure that teachers develop and implement grading policies and practices that highlight grades' usefulness as a form of feedback while reducing any potentially negative connotations. We also need to make sure students and their families are aware of these efforts.

Current status of grades

In many ways, grades are at the same place today that standardized tests were 20 years ago. As accountability advocates pressed for an increased emphasis on students' test scores, educators and others began to criticize the tests. They pointed out, and rightly so, that the multiple-choice format and restricted content of the tests used in most schools narrowed the curriculum and diminished learning for students. They described standardized tests as detrimental to true learning and suggested that schools would better serve students by getting rid of them (Kohn, 2000; McNeil, 2000).

Educational measurement experts tried to point out that these criticisms are true for only a narrow range of tests. Other testing formats that require students to construct their responses provide teachers with valuable information on students' learning progress (Shepard & Bliem, 1995). But these voices were drowned out by critics who gained public support with their outcries, even though such outcries were based on only partial truths.

Unable to counter these narrow interpretations of tests, the educational measurement community took a different approach: They changed the name. Measures of student learning in any form were no longer labeled "tests," but were called "assessments." With the change of name, the entire tone of the conversation changed. Assessments seemed friendlier, less harsh, and far less threatening. While "test anxiety" was real and known to impact certain students' performance, "assessment anxiety" was virtually unknown.

Today, the same appears to be happening with grades. If teachers no longer give grades, critics believe that students and families will automatically shift their attention to learning instead of the accumulation of points and the status typically associated with high grades.

Some grading experts suggest we should do the same as was done with tests and simply change the name. For example, some suggest using “marks” to convey something less stigmatizing (Kuepper-Tetzel & Gardner, 2021). Others recommend “proficiency scales” (Hoegh, 2020) or “progress indicators” (Yang & Li, 2018) to measure fluctuating levels of performance rather than permanent achievement status. Although changing the name might offer a temporary reprieve, it’s unlikely to yield a lasting solution. A difficult but more productive approach would be for educators to clarify the meaning of grades and then radically alter the consequences attached to grades for students.

What are grades?

Grades are simply labels assigned to different levels or categories of student performance. They indicate how well students achieved a particular task or learning goal. These labels can be letters, numbers, words, symbols, or even emojis.

Grades serve one of the three important feedback functions John Hattie and Helen Timperley (2007) describe in their research review “The Power of Feedback.” According to Hattie and Timperley, the first part of teaching involves teachers’ initial instruction of new knowledge and skills, combined with assessments to evaluate students’ understanding and level of mastery. Feedback, then, is the second part of teaching.

If we use grades the right way, at the right time, and for the right reasons, they can be an effective form of feedback for students.

This feedback part of teaching involves three major questions: Where am I going? How am I going? Where to next? The first of these three questions defines the learning goals or destination. It lays out what students are expected to learn and be able to do as a result of engaging in particular learning tasks or instructional units. The second question — How am I going? — describes what progress students currently have made toward the goals. It clarifies where they are on the path to achieving mastery. And the final question — Where to next? — specifies the activities students should undertake to make better progress toward their goals. It is the second question that grades can answer by describing how close students are to reaching the goals.

Four conditions for grades as feedback

To function as effective feedback, grades must meet four necessary conditions. These conditions not only allow grades to serve important formative purposes, but also help remove the negative consequences of misuse.

1. Grades must be assigned to performance, not to students.

Beginning at the earliest levels, teachers must help students and their families understand that grades do not reflect *who* you are as a learner, but *where* you are in your learning journey. Teachers further must stress that grades *never* describe students’ capabilities or learning potential. Rather, they provide an indication of how near or far students are from reaching specific goals.

Too often, students see grades as a reflection of their innate talent, skill, or ability. Grades become personal labels that students use on themselves that can be difficult to change.

When students and families see grades as a reflection of current performance only, they recognize that knowing where you are is essential for improvement. Informative judgments from teachers about the quality of students' performance help students become more thoughtful judges of their own work. Admittedly, a grade, number, or symbol offers only a shorthand description of where students are, and additional information is essential for progress. But when accompanied by guidance on how to reach the goals, grades can be the basis for making those improvements.

2. Grades must be criterion-based, not norm-based.

Norm-based grades assess students' relative standing among classmates. It's sometimes known as "ego-involving" grading or "grading on the curve." With norm-based grading, a C doesn't mean you are at step three in a five-step process to mastery. Instead, it means your performance ranks you in the middle of the class and is "average" in comparison to your classmates.

Norm-based grading has profoundly negative consequences (Guskey & Brookhart, 2019). First, it communicates nothing about what students have learned or are able to do. Students who earn high grades may have performed poorly in terms of the learning goals but simply less poorly than their classmates. Second, it makes learning highly competitive, because students must compete against one another for the few high grades the teacher will assign. Third, it discourages student collaboration, because helping others threatens students' own chances for success. And fourth, it diminishes student-teacher relationships, since teachers who offer individualized assistance to students are interfering in the competition (Guskey, 2000).

Criterion-based or task-involving grading describes how well students have met learning goals. Students' grades are based on clearly defined performance expectations and have no relation to the performance of other students. Thus, criterion-based grades serve the communication purposes for which grades are intended. Because students compete against themselves to meet learning goals and not against each other, criterion-based grading encourages student collaboration. It also puts teachers and students on the same side, working together to master the goals.

Students need honest information from their teachers about the quality and adequacy of their performance in school.

Failure to recognize the consequences of norm-based versus criterion-based grades has led to critical misinterpretations of studies on the impact of grades. A prime example is the 1988 study by Ruth Butler, which is frequently cited by critics of grades to show the supposed detrimental effects of grades on students' interest and motivation. In her study, Butler compared the impact of three feedback conditions on 5th- and 6th-grade students. One group received only grades as feedback on a learning task, a second group received only comments, and a third group received both grades and comments. Results showed that students' interest and performance were generally higher after receiving comments alone than after grades alone or grades with comments.

What many fail to mention is that the grades teachers assigned in Butler's study were norm-based grades that communicated *nothing* about what students had learned. They were numbers ranging from 40 to 99 based on students' relative standing among classmates. The teachers'

comments, however, were criterion-based and offered students information about their performance *and* gave directions for how to improve.

In addition, the study's results were inconsistent. The effects were true *only* for students ranked in the bottom 25% of their class — those who received the lowest grades. Students ranked in the top 25% of their class, who received high grades, maintained their high interest and motivation. In other words, the influence of grades on motivation varied depending on the grade students received. The study did not consider the effects on the 50% of students in the middle of the class (Guskey, 2019).

A more recent study comparing grades and comments in which teachers assigned criterion-based, task-involving grades found very different results. Emma Smith and Stephen Gorard (2005) compared four groups of 7th-grade students who were given different forms of feedback. One group received “enhanced formative feedback” on their work for one year, but no marks or grades. The other three groups were given marks and grades with minimal comments. Results showed that progress in the comment-only group was “substantially inferior” to that of the other three groups and unpopular with the students as well. Although Smith and Gorard didn't analyze the precise nature of the teachers' comments, their results make clear that the effects of feedback depend more on its *quality* and *substance* than on its form or structure.

3. Grades must be seen as temporary.

Students' level of performance is never permanent. As students study and practice, their understanding grows and their performance improves. To accurately describe how well students have learned, grades must reflect students' current performance level.

When students understand that grades are temporary, they recognize that assessments don't mean the end of learning. Instead, assessment results describe where students are currently in their journey to mastery. Teachers must emphasize to their students that achieving less than mastery doesn't mean you can't make it, but only that you haven't made it yet, and there's more to do.

This temporary quality of grades also calls into question the process of averaging, which combines evidence from the past with current evidence, yielding an inaccurate depiction of what students achieved. Instead, current performance should always replace past evidence to make sure grades are accurate and valid.

4. Grades must be accompanied by guidance for improvement.

Students need guidance and direction on how to make better progress, reach the goals, and achieve success. This is true of all forms of feedback.

This aspect of feedback stems from the work of Benjamin Bloom (1968). In his descriptions of mastery learning, Bloom explained how teachers could use well-designed formative assessments to offer students regular feedback on what they learned well and what improvements were needed. But Bloom stressed that, to help students improve, this *diagnostic* information must be accompanied by *prescriptive* guidance on *how* to improve. He referred to these as corrective activities.

Corrective activities must be *new and different* from the original instruction, Bloom said. Reteaching concepts in the same way simply repeats a process that has already been shown not to work. Instead, correctives must offer instructional alternatives that present concepts and skills in new ways. He also recommended that students study only the concepts and skills on which they are having difficulty. In other words, the correctives are individualized, based on students' unique learning needs.

At best, grades offer only an overall appraisal of students' current level of performance. They don't provide the detailed information students need to identify their specific strengths and difficulties. Nor do they provide the guidance and direction students require to correct those difficulties. As Hattie and Timperley (2007) describe, grades offer only "feed back," not "feed up" nor "feed forward" information. The information grades offer is important but insufficient. When these appraisals of students' performance are accompanied by guidance for improvement, however, they can become valuable.

Students need honest information from their teachers about the quality and adequacy of their performance in school. Parents and families need to know how their children are doing and whether they are meeting grade-level or course expectations. Although grades should *never* be the only information about learning that students and families receive, they can be a meaningful part of that information. When combined with guidance to students and families on how improvements can be made, grades become a valuable tool in helping students achieve learning success.

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