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School Grades: Numbers vs Words

“Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.” — Albert Einstein

Should a student’s learning and comprehension be measured by numbers or words? The “Standards-Based Grading” controversy in the world of educators asks: should teachers grade the traditional way with a number value from 0 to 100 per assignment OR grade in a non-traditional way with level of sufficiency, proficiency, or excellency per common core state (or national) standard? The research below argues that standards-based grading is a very innovative, student oriented, meaningful way of grading. Scriffiny and Winger agree that standards-based grading is the best way to go, based on their research. On the other hand, McKeown and Wiggins argue for point-based grading.

Patricia L. Scriffiny in “Seven Reasons for Standards-Based Grading” argues that standards-based grading should replace traditional point-based grading. Her seven reasons are grades should have meaning; we need to challenge the status quo; we can control grading practices; standards-based grading reduces meaningless paperwork; it helps teachers adjust instruction; it teaches what quality looks like; and it’s a launchpad to other reforms. Her main thesis is that standards-based grading is a form of evaluation grading whose outcomes tell if the students need improvement, are proficient, or are advanced in meeting certain common core

standard objectives. She supports her thesis with much research; for example, how with standards-based grading every student can be met at their level and retested until proficient. Point-based grading does not offer this open space for improvement. She starts with her first reason “Grades Should Have Meaning” and supports it with a personal experience: “So what does each grade indicate to students, parents, and teachers of later courses in the sequence? When I first considered this question, I realized I had no answers.” Scriffiny made a realization that some of her students that were actually learning did not have the best homework or test scores, and some who had the highest grades were simply ‘playing school’ as she calls it — ‘playing school’ refers to students that show up to class, go through the motions, do as expected, study hard for exams, pass, and then forget what they have learned. One of her key arguments is that point-based grades have no meaning in the sense of passing on the message to the students and parents about what the students actually comprehend, leading to no actual parental knowledge of what the student does in class or is learning. Scriffiny’s argument is persuasive because she approaches her arguments by providing intriguing examples. One of her examples includes two pages from a grade book. One is point-based grading and the other is standards-based grading. She lets the visual speak for itself (see Figure 1.A and 1.B below). If I knew nothing about grading but understood that high numbers meant ‘good’ and low numbers meant ‘bad’ and the definition of the word proficient, I would choose the standards-based grading example. It is the obvious choice because one is able to understand what was being taught and how well the student comprehended. When reading a standards-based grade book the teacher can pass on what the student knows to his/her next teacher, the student can identify what they need to work on and what they excel at, and the parents can know what their child is learning and what

they can provide them help with. ‘Objective 1: write an alternate ending for a story,’ and reading the proficiency level speaks more for itself than ‘Homework average: 90 or 50 or 110 or 95’.

Figure 1.A and 1.B: Comparing Traditional and Standards-Based Grade Books

Figure 1.A: Traditional Grade Book

Name	Homework Average	Quiz 1	Chapter 1 Test
John	90	65	70
Bill	50	75	78
Susan	110	50	62
Felicia	10	90	85
Amanda	95	100	90

Figure 1.B: Standards-Based Grade Book

Name	Objective 1: Write and alternate ending for a story	Objective 2: Identify the elements of a story	Objective 3: Compare and contrast two stories
John	Partially proficient	Proficient	Partially proficient
Bill	Proficient	Proficient	Partially proficient
Susan	Partially proficient	Partially proficient	Partially proficient
Felicia	Advanced	Proficient	Proficient
Amanda	Partially proficient	Advanced	Proficient

Tony Winger in *Educational Leadership* questions traditional classroom grading practices. He considers how students relate to their grades, rather than straightforwardly pushing the movement for standards-based grading. Two of his arguments ask if grades measure what we value most and if grades provide accurate feedback. Winger writes,

“I recall telling my students, “Work hard and your grade will be fine.” Although I did not realize it, the message to students was clear: My unconscious curriculum was one of compliance. ... Some students received good grades and learned little; others learned much and failed. Grades measured students’ willingness to cooperate and work hard rather than their understanding of economics or their ability to use that understanding to think more clearly about their world. I was not assessing the learning that I valued most.”

Winger’s thesis is that some teachers are grading to simply judge what the student got done in time, got right, and their effort instead of conceptual understanding. He notes that there is a disconnection between grading content that is learned by the student with simply grading to ‘grade’ and wrote,

“If we expect our grades to promote learning, then we must be sure that our grades assess and report the learning that we believe is most essential. We as educators must become more conscious of our goals: the knowledge we want our students to understand; the skills we want them to refine; the kinds of reasoning we want them to demonstrate; and the connections we hope they will make between abstract concepts and life.”

Winger consistently throws in personal experiences, aside from extensive research. His conclusion is: “If we want to keep the focus on learning, we must not depend on grades to motivate our students” (Winger). He urges for teachers to grade with meaning (aka standards-based grading) in order to support and convince students that understanding is more important than a high number or letter grade.

Scriffiny notes that, “In the adult world, everything is a performance assessment.”

Although many readers and professionals can find this true, many can find it false. Joe McKeown based his argument against standards-based grading in his article “The Problem with Standards-Based Grading” on one component of the pedagogy behind standards-based grading.

McKeown finds fault with how standards-based grading assesses ‘skill’ for a standard. He says,

“Standards-based grading is a bad idea based on three flawed assumptions. It assumes that teachers only teach skills and not content, that homework is always a skills practice, and that grades should be exclusively for reporting what students can do against standards at the end of learning. Wrong, wrong, and wrong.”

McKeown then goes on to defend his statement by explaining each component. He sees the notion that teachers only teach skills as an assumption because he believes that skills are not taught in history, foreign language, or English. He consistently stresses the point that teachers solely teach content. He goes on to argue that standards-based grading is based on skills not content and is very inefficient. McKeown also believes that students will not do homework if they will receive no grade for it. A question for you, the reader, is if you remember being in school, having graded homework, and the teacher emphasizing its importance for practice aside from its grade value? It is a common practice (and common sense) to stress the importance of homework as practice. McKeown’s arguments are supported, but with no research cited and some of his arguments can be puzzling to the average reader.

Another writer who sees standards-based grading as good yet bad is Grant Wiggins in “Standards-Based Grading Only Solves Half The Problem”. Wiggins maintains that standards-

based grading does force the students to meet standards and to have more thoughtful grading which he is in favor of, but he believes that it does not provide the right rigor. He states,

“Rigor is not established by the teaching. It’s not established by framing teaching against standards. Therefore, rigor is established by our expectations: how we evaluate and score student work. That means that rigor is established by the three different elements of assessment: 1. The difficulty of the task or questions, 2. The difficulty of the criteria, as established by rubrics, and 3. The level of achievement expected, as set by “anchors” or cut scores.”

Wiggins sees a solution to this problem of not having enough rigor in school by frequently evaluating students’ work against the state’s best work, as well as using the teacher’s own wisdom to judge fairness, growth, and effort uniformly. This solution goes against standards-based grading because a teacher should not grade with personal bias or compare students in standards-based grading. Although this solution does encourage the use of standards, it does not encourage the whole ideology and method of standards-based grading. The solution implies standards use with rigorous homework and tests to really ‘put the student to a challenge’ — even though every standard should naturally be a challenge for all students before it is taught, their proficiency after that is on them. Wiggins’s proposed solution’s overall context is wanting to use teachers’ own wisdom, with an underlying side of bias and relentless rigor, to grade a student on how well they met the standard. This can be conflicting because a teacher’s bias can vary per student, and a student’s success one day to another can vary per personality, academic inclination, any sort of disability, or external circumstances.

Standards-based grading is either accepted or seen faulty by educators, students, and parents. The majority favors standards-based grading. I, as a future educator, favor standards-based grading for its core concept of grading with meaning. But, the opposing party's arguments and reasons also seem convincing. I hope by now you, reader, have a formulated, well thought out, and researched opinion on should a student's learning and comprehension be measured by numbers or words?

Works Cited

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