

# UNgrading

Why Rating Students  
Undermines Learning  
(and What to Do  
Instead)

EDITED BY

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With a foreword by Alfie Kohn

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## Chapter 5

## GRADES STIFLE STUDENT LEARNING. CAN WE LEARN TO TEACH WITHOUT GRADES?

Arthur Chiaravalli

Several years ago I encountered the work of Dylan Wiliam, who researched the effect of teacher feedback on student improvement. In his book *Embedded Formative Assessment*, he cites a study by Ruth Butler wherein she examines the three types of feedback teachers give: grades alone, both grades and comments, and comments alone.<sup>1</sup>

The results of Butler's research might seem counterintuitive: the students who showed the most growth were those who received comments alone. Even grades paired with comments—which at face value would seem to be the richest form of feedback—were just as ineffective as giving grades alone.<sup>2</sup>

Wiliam concludes: "That most students virtually ignore . . . painstaking correction, advice, and praise is one of public education's best-kept secrets."<sup>3</sup>

Not only do grades not encourage growth, they inhibit it. Grades take the focus off feedback.

As a teacher of English language arts who prides himself on providing quality feedback, I find this result particularly disturbing. But it didn't surprise me: frequently a student who receives an assignment back

glances at the letter grade and then stows or throws it away without ever reading the comments. This remains true even though, for most of my career, I have allowed students to revise and improve their scores on assessments.

Something about the letter grade causes learning to stop.

Finally, after much more reading, reflection, and deliberation, I made the decision to use *feedback and revisions only*, without entering a letter grade until the end of each term. It just made sense.

Much of Butler's and Wiliam's research confirms the findings of other researchers like Carol Dweck, whose book *Mindset* introduced the world to growth mindset, and Daniel Pink, whose book *Drive* argued that extrinsic rewards and punishments stifle creativity, higher-order thinking, and intrinsic motivation.<sup>4</sup>

In short, the grade becomes a false currency that, over time, seems to override students' intrinsic desire for mastery and personal sense of purpose. Students find themselves trapped in the Sisyphean task of continually laboring for a letter or number. And as Camus put it in his *The Myth of Sisyphus*, "There is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor."<sup>5</sup>

One might argue that these letters and numbers still represent something. But due to grade inflation and idiosyncratic grading policies, that "something" has no consistent or reliable meaning. As Robert Marzano writes, "grades are so imprecise, they are almost meaningless."<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, like printed currency no longer moored to the gold standard, scores, grades, GPA, and class rankings decreasingly possess any guaranteed *exchange* value. Students may still be able to exchange these currencies for college admission, scholarships, and in turn well-paying jobs, but these are no longer foregone conclusions. Laszlo Bock, formerly of Google, asserts, "One of the things we've seen from all our data crunching is that G.P.A.'s are worthless as a criteria for hiring, and test scores are worthless . . . We found that they don't predict anything."<sup>7</sup>

Getting into college is not enough. In order to avoid an adulthood driven by debt on a par with indentured servitude, students almost always need major scholarship help.<sup>8</sup> Society has to be concerned when generations of graduates will need to adopt a near-mercenary mindset

to pay back crippling debt. Who will be our teachers, social workers, musicians, poets, dancers?

For students the question arises: will I truly be able to exchange this letter grade, this GPA, or this class rank for anything of value? Perhaps at one time students could, regardless of the underlying quality of the education. But the answer is increasingly no, that these empty distinctions guarantee you little if anything in life, as the book of Isaiah puts it,

Why spend your money for what is not bread;  
your wages for what does not satisfy?<sup>9</sup>

Since the significance and value of grades have steadily declined, it makes even less sense to let grades do us a double disservice by hobbling learning in the classroom. And since I hope to engender dispositions of growth mindset and intrinsic motivation in my students, I want to eliminate any practices and policies that prevent these perspectives from flourishing.

That includes letter grades.

Now in my classes, students only receive written and verbal feedback about what they did well and what they can improve. Using an online portfolio platform (I use Seesaw), it is relatively easy to document student progress toward meeting learning targets. While I do still usually give a mainstream assignment through which students can demonstrate those targets, students can also suggest other ways to show the same learning. For example, to show their recognition of how ancient poets use the characteristics of oral literature to convey meaning, I might ask students to write a short analysis of an ancient text, identifying the presence of those characteristics and how they parallel meaning. But students could also write and perform a poem or rap that uses the same ancient methods to support the message and emotion they want to express. With Seesaw, students can upload documents, pictures, videos, and links to work they've done elsewhere. Additionally I frequently have students draw on, highlight, annotate, and comment on their own artifacts, instilling a habit of regular self-assessment. Seesaw has built-in drawing, labeling, and commenting features that facilitate this kind of reflection.

Throughout the term students evaluate their own and other students' work, make improvements in response to feedback from their

teacher and peers, and elicit and receive new feedback—all of which has been shown to aid students in becoming more engaged and effective learners.<sup>10</sup> This feedback cycle is not unlike the process used by coaches to prepare players for an upcoming game or meet. Coaches don't put a score on the scoreboard during practices; that only happens during the game. Up until that moment of truth, coaches do everything they can to develop players in the skills and concepts they will need to succeed. To grade or rate them sends the subtle message that their current achievement is fixed. This is the exact opposite of the mentality needed to sustain growth and improvement. The goal is to keep the conversation going as long as possible.

As we continue that conversation, I do still use our traditional online gradebook to more or less tally students' submission of artifacts. A 1/1 in the gradebook indicates that an artifact has been completed at an adequate level; a 0/1 indicates that the work has not been submitted or has not yet demonstrated the skill. I weight these tallies as 0 percent, so they have no effect on the cumulative grade, which I base on a preliminary grade students identify at the beginning of the term. If a student has too many missing artifacts, I will override this grade with an I, or Incomplete. I use the comment field for each assignment to direct students and parents away from the gradebook and toward our portfolio platform, where more detailed feedback is available. We have trained students and parents to look to reductive numbers to judge students' current status; weaning them from this habit won't happen overnight. In my communications with students and parents, I continually emphasize the merits of providing comments alone in promoting growth.

At the end of each term, I ask students to submit artifacts that demonstrate their mastery of our learning targets. They use a simple Google Form (fig. 5.1) that features links to any exemplary work or full-class feedback I have shared with students throughout the term. Students also review any verbal or written feedback they received individually and point out areas where they showed growth in response to that feedback, either through revisions or improvements on subsequent attempts.

Ultimately students select and support a final term grade, using wording from my descriptive grading criteria, which describe the levels

## Term 4 Grade Evaluation - AP Lit

Dear Students,

Please use the following form to reflect on your work this term. It will lead you through the four statements on the Descriptive Grading Criteria (<https://goo.gl/1PM5cu>). You should make sure to have your Seesaw portfolio up (<https://app.seesaw.me>) while you do this so you can review work and include SHARE LINKS as evidence.

As you reflect on what you demonstrated this term, please make sure to check your work against the exemplary work shared throughout the term. Before going on to the next section, jot down the letter grade you chose for each statement.

As always, please honor the exemplary effort and work of your peers by rating yourself honestly and accurately for each of the four bullet points on the Descriptive Grading Criteria. I wish you all the best to you as you begin the exciting next chapter in your life. Do NOT be a stranger!

Sincerely,

Mr. Chiaravalli

Figure 5.1. Term 4 grade evaluation for Advanced Placement Literature.

of achievement and growth associated with an A, a B, and a C grade (fig. 5.2). I don't go lower than a C, because to me that indicates the student has not demonstrated mastery or understanding of one or more skills or concepts. In those cases, I ask students either to revise or redo the assessment, or demonstrate the skills elsewhere. Rather than give students a low grade and rubber-stamp them onto the next level, I give students time to revisit and demonstrate mastery of those targets.

Emphasis is always placed on more recent levels of performance, rather than on earlier attempts where students were still learning the skill or concept. I use Form Publisher—a Google Forms add-on—to publish and peruse these student grade evaluations in Google Docs, and use in-text comments to reply to their self-evaluation. I usually agree with these determinations. Sometimes I argue they earned something higher. If I don't agree and enter a lower grade, I always give them the opportunity to follow up on the specific areas holding them back.

I've found that this approach, while not perfect, allows students to

## Descriptive Grading Criteria

You must use phrasing from the Descriptive Grading Criteria throughout your grading letter, video, or conference, supporting it with concrete evidence from your work. Please feel free to ask for feedback at any point during the term if you want my opinion on your current grade and how you can improve it.

<b>A</b> Outstanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Demonstrates a high level of understanding of concepts/mastery of skills on quizzes (A's)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Exhibits novel, insightful, and/or creative ways to show learning</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Meets all learning targets fully and/or consistently</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Shows frequent evidence of growth, turning weaknesses to strengths</li> </ul>
<b>B</b> Good	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Demonstrates a good grasp of concepts and skills on quizzes (B's)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Exhibits a combination of standard and novel/insightful/creative ways to show learning</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Meets most learning targets, including all required ones, fully and/or consistently</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Shows some evidence of growth</li> </ul>
<b>C</b> Satisfactory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Demonstrates a satisfactory acquisition of concepts and skills on quizzes (C's)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Exhibits standard ways to show learning</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Meets required learning targets fully and/or consistently</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Shows little evidence of growth</li> </ul>
<b>Incomplete</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Does not show satisfactory acquisition of skills and concepts on quizzes (&lt; C)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Does not meet one or more required learning targets</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Provides too little evidence of learning to make a determination</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Shows no evidence of growth</li> </ul>

Figure 5.2. Descriptive grading criteria.

have greater awareness and ownership of their learning. They know what they need to improve and how to improve it. They are no longer numbered by numbers.

Now is the time we shift the focus of schools from grades back to learning, creating an environment in which our students can thrive and grow.

## NOTES

1. Wiliam 2018. See also Butler 1987.
2. Butler 1988.
3. Wiliam 2014.
4. Dweck 2008; Pink 2009.
5. Camus and O'Brien 2018: 119.
6. Marzano 2000: 1.
7. Bryant 2018.
8. Konczal 2009.
9. Isaiah 55:2.
10. Boaler 1998.

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Part II

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## PRACTICES