

Appendix A

Sample Action Research Report

The Effects of De-Emphasizing Grades on the Achievement and Stress Levels of Students in Health Class

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Rationale for Study

In recent years teachers have looked for alternative assessment methods that can more accurately measure student learning. This trend not only recognizes the need to meet the multitude of student learning styles but also calls into question the validity of the traditional grading practices. These practices seem arbitrary, subjective, often invalid, and false as a true measure of student learning. Common grading practices such as averaging and curving are not educationally sound. Other questionable practices such as assessing student “effort,” and using failing grades as student motivators and accepting the assumption that teachers are capable of being objective when grading, indicated a need to conduct action research in this area.

Research Design and Question


My action research project focused on how de-emphasizing traditional grading practices would affect learning. Specifically, would the de-emphasis of grades, while emphasizing learning, affect student effort or performance? Finally, would this method correspond to a lessening of student stress?


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First I abandoned the traditional assessment of letter grades, points or percentages on homework assignments and instead gave either a check or a zero to indicate that the student's work was done correctly and met the quality of work that was expected for this assignment. A zero indicated that the assignment had not been turned in or was of poor quality. Students were given the opportunity to redo any assignment that had received a zero. For test assessments, I also abstained from traditional methods of grading. Incorrect answers were marked wrong and notations made on essay answers. I did record the actual number of correct points, but the students never saw this. Instead, the students saw much more complete explanations of what was wrong and right about their answers. The students also had the option of improving upon their test performance should they choose to do so by retaking tests. 

Several essay tests were given during the semester. In addition to the feedback students received from me, the tests were also assessed by one of their peers. The peers were asked to point out strengths and weaknesses in their classmates' answers. I wanted to use peer assessments to validate my own assessment of a particular student's essay.

Data Collection/Analysis

One of the real keys to this project that looked at the effects of de-emphasizing grades, lie in the students' ability to accurately evaluate their own performance. At the end of each 2–3 week unit, students wrote a self-evaluation. They based their self-assessment on the homework notebook, tests and quizzes, peer evaluation, teacher evaluation, class participation and perhaps most importantly on their own "gut-level" feeling as to how they truly understood the material. With this information in mind, students turned in a letter grade with a detailed explanation of why they felt they deserved this grade. These self-evaluations grew in detail and depth as the semester progressed. 


Instead of using the traditional percentage method of assessment as a guide for their self-evaluations, we developed a new method. The students were divided into small groups and asked to create the criteria needed to receive an A, B, C, and D. This criteria was the basis for all evaluations. By using these criteria, students had a guideline to accurately assess their performance. The onus of determining a grade now became the students' responsibility and not the teacher's. If the students could justify their self-evaluation grade based on the agreed upon criteria then they received that grade. Consequently, students reported that they felt much more ownership in their achievement and the final grade. 

This feeling of ownership was obvious by the few complaints I received from students regarding their grades. There were four actual grades given in my class per semester—two quarter grades, a final exam grade, and a final semester grade. During the entire school year I only had five incidents (out of a possible 684 opportunities) in which any student questioned a grade. 


Initially I had a great deal of concern about putting so much stock in students' self-evaluations, as I thought they might take advantage of this new found freedom and give themselves all A's. My research revealed that the vast majority of student self-evaluations coincided with my own evaluation of their performance. These statistics [illustrating] the similarities between teacher evaluations and student self-evaluations for the 1997–98 school year are as follows:

Comparison of Student and Teacher Evaluations

<i>Grade Differences</i>	<i>1st Quarter</i>	<i>2nd Quarter</i>	<i>3rd Quarter</i>	<i>4th Quarter</i>
Identical Grade	56%	38%	51%	48%
+/- One Grade	31%	42%	36%	39%
+/- Two Or More Grades	13%	20%	12%	11%
+/- Four Or More Grades	2%	3%	3%	2%


Additionally, students showed pride in their work and in giving accurate self-evaluation grades. The following two student comments illustrate the integrity demonstrated by the majority of students. 


- “I knew I had to be honest with myself.”
- “Integrity defines you and if you die tomorrow, people won’t remember your grades or your statistics, they remember how true and real you were with yourself . . .”

Parents helped evaluate the results of this project. In addition to an informational letter sent home describing the project and a presentation at Parent Open House, randomly selected parents were interviewed by phone in order to elicit feedback. The majority of the parents contacted were unaware of the specifics of the project. In spite of that, parent support was indicated in the fact that I did not receive a single parent phone call with a grade question or complaint [which was] a clear departure from previous years. 

If student effort can be measured by improved grades, then it should be noted that grades have improved since this project has been initiated. If effort is measured by student attendance, then it is interesting that the absentee rate in my classes is below the class average in my department. If effort is shown by students taking advantage of the test retake option or homework redo option, then it should be noted that students frequently took advantage of these opportunities. The conclusion that can be drawn is that student effort is not greatly affected by the method of assessment. Several student comments help to illustrate this point.


- “I tried just as hard as any other class.”
- “. . . the pressure is on you to just do your best without the pressure of grades.”

It has become obvious to me that grades do not have to be held at the end of a stick like a carrot in order to promote student effort. Rather effort is a natural outgrowth of intrinsically motivated students and relevant material. 

An end of the semester survey helped to provide some answers to the questions I had regarding this project. One such question on the survey specifically stated, “The grading practices used in this class increased 


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my comfort level by decreasing my stress level.” Of the students surveyed during the year, 68.5% of them agreed with this statement. Some of the most interesting information can be found by examining comments from the students.

- “Yes, the stress of that “Letter Grade” wasn’t present at all times”
- “Yes, because I wasn’t too stressed out about letter grades and percentages. I rarely thought about grades. I thought about doing well” 

Student comments also highlighted the strong relationship between a reduced stress environment and an enhanced learning environment.

- “By decreasing my stress I believe I learned more.”
- “I felt less stressed about my grade. I was more able to concentrate on actual learning.”

The evidence suggests that lessening stress and tension caused by de-emphasizing grades creates a greater sense of safety and community in the classroom. This improved sense of community creates a healthier environment in which students can learn. 

Learning and how it is affected by grading practices continues at the heart of this project. In a very practical area such as health education, learning can be measured by the practical application of the material covered. Often times this application may go unnoticed by a teacher and may be impossible to measure with a traditional grading method. Several questions from the survey sought input on the effect that de-emphasizing grades had on student learning. For example students were asked to agree/disagree with this statement. “I feel that the grading practices used in this course helped me to focus more on my learning than on my grade.” 74% of the students agreed with this statement. Another statement was, “I would recommend that this teacher continue using these grading practices because they help students to learn better.” 85% of the students agreed with this. It is obvious from these statistics that students felt that the practice of de-emphasizing grades correlated with emphasizing learning. Several student comments also illustrated this point. 

- “The information that we received will be more useful because we know it. We didn’t just learn it for a grade.”
- “I know the material better this way. Instead of focusing on grades, I focus on learning.”


A more conventional way to illustrate “learning” is to look at traditional marks that students received as semester grades. This chart shows the breakdown of grades over the past three years. During the 1995–96 school year traditional grading practices were used.

There has been a significant increase in the number of A’s earned over the past two years, as well as a slightly less significant decrease in the number of D/E grades. These numbers suggest that students who perform in a stress free environment and who value learning for learning sake rather than for an artificial reward will perform better.

In order to examine students’ attitudes regarding grades, and how, if at all, they are influenced by experiencing a semester in which grades are de-emphasized, students took a survey on the first day of the


Grade Distributions Over Three Years


<i>Grade</i>	<i>95–96 School Year</i>	<i>96–97 School Year</i>	<i>97–98 School Year</i>
A's	27%	44.5%	36%
A's & B's	63.5%	70%	61.5%
D's & E's	16.5%	13.5%	15%
E's	4.5%	2%	3%

semester and on the last day of the semester. Students did not know the purpose of this survey, nor did they realize that grades were going to be de-emphasized in this class. 

Some significant changes did occur in students' attitudes as the semester progressed. At the start of semester 2, 35% of the students disagreed with the statement that "Grades accurately measure a student's level of learning in a class." By June, the number disagreeing had grown to 50%. At the start of first semester, 55% of the students agreed with the statement that "Grades accurately measure a student's level of effort in a class." By January the number had diminished to 42%. At the start of 1st semester 52% of the students were in agreement with the statement that grades create stress in my life. By January the number had increased to 72%. Apparently once the stress associated with traditional grading practices was removed, students were better able to see the stress that these practices actually caused. At the start of the semester, 64% of the students agreed with the statement that "Receiving a good grade is my number one goal in this class." By January the number had shrunk to 41%. Without extrinsic motivators like grades to cloud the issue, students were better able to see the intrinsic value of learning.

Findings and Recommendations/ Research Summary

This action research project to investigate the effects of de-emphasizing grades on learning has confirmed my findings from last year, as well as my "gut level" feelings about traditional grading practices. Grades are not essential to nor do they guarantee learning. They do not necessarily promote greater student effort or push students to greater understanding. Grading practices can oftentimes not only destroy the community we as teachers try to create in our classroom but also destroy students' self-esteem. Traditional grading often obscures what is really important, learning for learning sake. 

Giving up grading practices and beliefs that teachers have held for years can be a very scary proposition. It is not always easy to turn over some of our control to others. Perhaps our first steps need to be small and safe "baby steps." Finding an assignment here or a lab there in which we can escape from the grading "merry-go-round" is a safe way to enter this new area of assessment. By taking these steps, we as teachers can devote less time to pushing a pencil and punching a calculator and spend more time with our most important job—that of helping our students reach their full potential. 

Source: "The Effects of De-Emphasizing Grades on the Achievement and Stress Levels of Students in Health Class," by John Gorleski, Highland Park (IL) High School. Retrieved from <http://www.dist113.org/hphs/action/page4.htm>.