

# Why We Grade, How We Grade

## The Purposes, Practices, Problems, & Potential of Reporting Student Learning

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## Grading Defined

“...the process of abstracting  
a great deal of information  
into a single symbol for ease  
of communication.”

--Rick Stiggins,  
*Student-Involved Classroom Assessment*, 2001

### Three general assertions today:

1. Without a statement of purpose for grading, there will be a variety of purposes.
2. Too many policies that guide our grading practices contradict our aspirations for our kids.
3. If students' grades can only be improved if they show evidence of authentic academic achievement, the game of school is altered. Learning becomes more closely aligned with grades. (Now, what we do with those grades...)

“People are overlooked for a variety of biased reasons and perceived flaws.”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yGf6LNWY9AI>



## The Lasallian mission...

...embodies the vision and innovative spirit of founder, Saint John Baptist De La Salle, the patron saint of teachers, and centers on Catholic values, **personal relationships** and **academic excellence**. Since De La Salle founded the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools three centuries ago, our mission has thrived on providing a human and Christian education to young people, **especially the poor**.

Lasallian education in our Region continues to **innovate in responding to the needs of the disadvantaged** including offering **services to troubled youth**; providing scholarships, support, and **specialized programs to students in need**; and founding the San Miguel Schools, a new model of non-tuition driven schools that serve students from families of limited financial means.

Many of the innovations De La Salle instituted are still present in today's classrooms. **A pioneer in education**, De La Salle popularized teaching students practical subjects and religion in their native language instead of Latin, and doing it in classrooms rather than private instruction. One of his most unique innovations to education was **establishing a community of educators who could provide continuity** to the school year.

## Qualifications, Cautions, & Caveats:

- ✦ The primary purpose of assessment should be the **enhancement of student learning**.
- ✦ The Focus Should Be **Learning**--& Grading Should support the **Focus**.
- ✦ Grading is not a substitute for assessment.
- ✦ Grades can't do everything we want them to do.
- ✦ Grading policies & practices substantially influence student motivation.
- ✦ **Policy** shapes Culture.

## Best Intentions Meet Classroom Culture

“Growth, then decay, then transformation.”

–Walter White, *Breaking Bad* (S1,E1)



✦ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-d23GS56HjQ>

## A Framework for Grading



Guskey (1996) separated learning criteria used for grading into 3 categories:

1. **Product** (what students know & can do)
2. **Process** (how students achieved results)
3. **Progress** (student growth over time)

## Format of the Study

Online surveys of 486 Catholic secondary school teachers & 50 administrators from 33 high schools in California, Nevada, & Hawai'i.

1. to determine the purposes for which teachers grade,
2. the practices they employ in determining grades, &
3. the purposes for which their schools grade.

✦ In addition, a thematic analysis of 52 schools' grading documents was completed.

## Purposes for Grading

1. Communicate re **student achievement**
2. Provide feedback for **self-evaluation**
3. Identify kids for **educational paths**
4. **Motivate** the student to learn.
5. **Modify student behavior.**
6. Evaluate **effectiveness of programs.**

## Catholic High Schools & Statements of Purpose for Grading

Does your school have an official statement of purpose for grading?

No 59.6%

Yes 40.4%

Does your school's statement of purpose identify communicating ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT as the primary purpose for why grades are reported?

No 13.8%

Yes 86.2%

## Thematic Analysis of Published School Grading Policies

**TWENTY** (20) of 52 schools published grading policies for their teachers, with the level of detail varying substantially.

**NINE** (9) schools expressed that they leave the development of grading policies up to individual teachers.

**FIVE** (5) schools delegated the development of grading policies to their academic departments.

**EIGHTEEN** (18) schools published no grading policies in their Parent Student Handbooks or on their school websites.



## Teacher Survey Results

Is your system of grading based solely on achievement?

| Yes         | No          |
|-------------|-------------|
| 215 (50.2%) | 213 (49.8%) |

## Teachers' Inclusion of Non-Achievement Grading Criteria in Determining Grades (all teachers)

| Do you include...   | Yes         | No          |
|---------------------|-------------|-------------|
| ✦ ...HW?            | 335 (78.3%) | 93 (21.7%)  |
| ✦ ...effort?        | 243 (57.3%) | 181 (42.7%) |
| ✦ ...participation? | 302 (71.2%) | 122 (28.8%) |
| ✦ ...attendance?    | 94 (22.2%)  | 330 (77.8%) |
| ✦ ...work habits?   | 169 (39.9%) | 255 (60.1%) |
| ✦ ...neatness?      | 132 (31.1%) | 292 (68.9%) |
| ✦ ...behavior?      | 126 (29.7%) | 298 (70.3%) |
| ✦ ...improvement?   | 234 (55.3%) | 189 (44.7%) |

*Sources of Process- and Progress-Oriented Grading and Reporting Evidence for the 215 Teachers Who Reported They Grade **Only to Communicate Achievement***

| Item                                      | Yes         | No          |
|-------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| ✦ Do you include HW intended as practice? | 175 (81.4%) | 40 (18.6%)  |
| ✦ Do you assess notebooks or journals?    | 98 (45.6%)  | 117 (54.4%) |
| ✦ Do you include "effort?"                | 84 (39.1%)  | 131 (60.9%) |
| ✦ Do you include "class attendance?"      | 30 (14.0%)  | 185 (86.0%) |
| ✦ Do you include "work habits?"           | 51 (23.7%)  | 164 (76.3%) |
| ✦ Do you include "neatness?"              | 50 (23.3%)  | 165 (76.7%) |
| ✦ Do you include "behavior?"              | 28 (13.0%)  | 187 (87.0%) |
| ✦ Do you include "participation?"         | 120 (55.8%) | 95 (44.2%)  |
| ✦ Do you include "improvement?"           | 86 (40.0%)  | 129 (60.0%) |

*Grade Reporting for Achievement by Subject Area*

**Is your system of determining grades based solely on academic achievement?**

| Subject Area             | Yes        | No         |
|--------------------------|------------|------------|
| Mathematics              | 45 (65.2%) | 24 (34.8%) |
| Foreign Language         | 24 (64.9%) | 13 (35.1%) |
| Science                  | 34 (60.7%) | 22 (39.3%) |
| English                  | 47 (52.8%) | 42 (47.2%) |
| History/Social Studies   | 27 (46.6%) | 31 (53.4%) |
| Religious Studies        | 35 (46.1%) | 41 (53.9%) |
| Computers/Digital Media  | 3 (30.0%)  | 7 (70.0%)  |
| Physical Education       | 4 (25.0%)  | 12 (75.0%) |
| Visual & Performing Arts | 7 (21.2%)  | 26 (78.8%) |



## What's Wrong With these Scales?

### Letter Grades\*

**A..... 93% - 100%**  
**A- ..... 90% - 92%**  
**B+ ..... 87% - 89%**  
**B ..... 83% - 86%**  
**B- ..... 80% - 82%**  
**C+ ..... 77% - 79%**  
**C ..... 73% - 76%**  
**C- ..... 70% - 72%**  
**D+ ..... 67% - 69%**  
**D ..... 60% - 66%**  
**F ..... 0% - 59%**

VS.

| Letter Grade | Grading Scale |
|--------------|---------------|
| A+           | 96-100        |
| A            | 90-95.99      |
| A -          | 85-89.99      |
| B+           | 80-84.99      |
| B            | 75-79.99      |
| B-           | 70-74.99      |
| C+           | 65-69.99      |
| C            | 60-64.99      |
| C-           | 55-59.99      |
| D+           | 53-54.99      |
| D            | 50-52.99      |
| F            | 0-49          |

VS.

100-97 A  
 96-93 A-  
 90-92 B+  
 89-87 B  
 86-85 B  
 84-80 C+  
 79-75 C  
 74-70 C-  
 69-68 D+  
 67-66 D  
 65 D-  
 64-below F

Close to Normal

Curved for you

curved against you

The cut-off lines of the scale ought to depend on the **degree of difficulty** of the assessment.



(Mark ALL that apply.) The creator of this political cartoon believes free trade is unfair because... \_\_\_\_\_.

- a. ...international trade agreements and the World Trade Organization favor large corporations over workers.
- b. ...workers lose the ability to negotiate fair conditions and wages when facing competition from cheaper overseas workers.
- c. ...small producers do not have the financial resources or the global reach to access less expensive labor and less expensive raw materials the way corporations do.

It's not the scale that should determine the grade a student's earns on an assessment. The complexity (i.e., degree of difficulty) of the assessment should determine the "scale."

**Cut-Offs for the Previous Assessment**

86% = A

75% = B

63% = C

50% = D

## Tom Guskey on Assessment

✦ [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6T\\_1rR022QY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6T_1rR022QY)

## Problematic Grading Practices

- ✦ Do you determine students' final grades by grading on a curve?

No 90.2%

Yes 9.8%

## Problematic Grading Practices: Grade Ranges

- ✦ In your grading scale, is the range for the grade of F larger than the ranges for A, B, C, & D?

No 17.3%

Yes 82.7%

- ✦ Do you record scores of zero on a 100-point scale (eg, for work not submitted or plagiarized)?

No 9.1%

Yes 90.9%

## Problematic Grading Practices: Including Practice-Oriented Homework

✧ Do you include homework scores in a student's grade?

No    21.7%

Yes    78.3%

❖ Do you score homework for accuracy & correctness?

No    48.9%

Yes    51.1%

✧ Do you score homework for its completion?

No    6.3%

Yes    93.7%

## What if homework was not included? An Actual Example

| Course        | HW Included |    |    |    |   | HW Not Included |    |    |    |    |
|---------------|-------------|----|----|----|---|-----------------|----|----|----|----|
|               | A           | B  | C  | D  | F | A               | B  | C  | D  | F  |
| Algebra 1-2   | 24          | 44 | 34 | 13 | 3 | 13              | 35 | 38 | 19 | 13 |
| Geometry H    | 16          | 8  | 4  | 0  | 0 | 9               | 17 | 10 | 2  | 0  |
| Algebra 3-4   | 22          | 49 | 39 | 11 | 2 | 18              | 46 | 31 | 22 | 6  |
| Math Analysis | 16          | 28 | 8  | 0  | 0 | 10              | 26 | 13 | 3  | 0  |
| AP Calculus   | 4           | 11 | 2  | 0  | 0 | 2               | 12 | 1  | 2  | 0  |

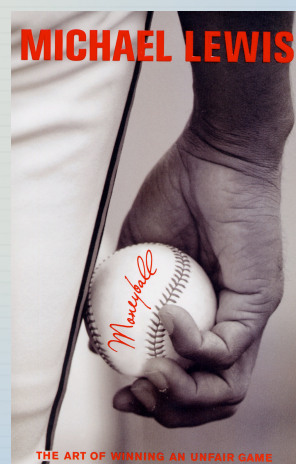
## What if homework was not included? An Actual Example

| <u>ALGEBRA 3-4</u> | <u>HW Included</u> |          |          |          |          | <u>HW Not Included</u> |          |          |          |          |
|--------------------|--------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|------------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
|                    | <u>A</u>           | <u>B</u> | <u>C</u> | <u>D</u> | <u>F</u> | <u>A</u>               | <u>B</u> | <u>C</u> | <u>D</u> | <u>F</u> |
| Teacher X          | 8                  | 11       | 10       | 1        | 0        | 7                      | 9        | 10       | 3        | 1        |
| Teacher X          | 5                  | 7        | 5        | 4        | 1        | 4                      | 7        | 4        | 5        | 2        |
| Teacher Y          | 4                  | 15       | 8        | 2        | 0        | 2                      | 15       | 8        | 4        | 0        |
| Teacher Y          | 3                  | 9        | 10       | 2        | 0        | 2                      | 8        | 7        | 6        | 1        |
| Teacher Y          | 2                  | 7        | 6        | 2        | 1        | 3                      | 7        | 2        | 4        | 2        |

Data leads to errors if it's misinterpreted; it also leads to errors if there are flaws in its production.

“[Reciting baseball] statistics was *beside* the point. The point was *understanding*.”

--Michael Lewis, *Moneyball*, p. 95



## **The Impact of Grades on Student Motivation & Learning**

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“You can enhance or destroy students’ desire to succeed in school more quickly and permanently through your use of assessment than with any other tools you have at your disposal.”

--Rick Stiggins

On Success  
Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers* (2008)

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*Outliers* asserts that success depends on the idiosyncrasies of the selection process used to identify talent just as much as it does on [people’s] natural abilities.



## Theories on Motivation

Carol Dweck, Stanford University

### A Fixed Mindset:

Challenge & effort are threatening. If you need effort to do something you must not be good at it.

### A Growth Mindset:

Effort makes you smarter.

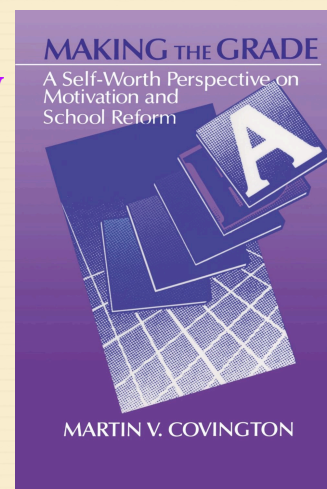
## Theories on Motivation

### Self-Worth Theory

Martin Covington, University of California, Berkeley

“If failure threatens students’ self-images of competency, then they are likely to withdraw from learning, particularly those who already harbor doubts about their ability.”

To foster motivational equality in the classroom: “grades should be an indicator & result of successful learning, not just participation.”



## The Consensus on Grading From Educational Measurement Experts\*

\*Guskey, Marzano, Stiggins, Brookhart, O'Connor...

Begin with a School-wide Purpose for Grading

Report Achievement Separately from Progress & Process

Exclude Non-Achievement Factors

Eliminate Zeros on a 100-point Scale

Equal Grade Ranges for A B C D F (No “0-59 = F”)

Allow for Retakes...for Full Credit

Do Not Depend on Averaging Scores to Determine Grades

## State the School's Purpose for Grading

“Saint Mary’s teachers assign letter grades to communicate the level of student’s academic achievement in a course. Grades are communications about a student’s academic achievement and are not intended to communicate a student’s effort, conduct, ability, or potential. While diligent study and effort are expected from each student, it is the quality of the student’s performances on assessments that determines the grades the student achieves.”

“Grading is a professional judgment of student performance measured against course criteria (as expressed in course outlines/syllabi)...While mathematical computation may help inform a teacher’s judgment, grading is more than a process of mathematical computation. It is a professional judgment of student performance.”

## Communicating About Student Learning: Grade Book Categories

“Quiz,” “Test,” “Paper,” “Presentation,”  
“Homework,” “Final Exam”

vs

“Content Knowledge,” “Analysis,”  
“Communication Skills,” “Synthesis”

“...It’s threatening the way that they do things. And every  
time that happens...the people who are holding the reins,  
with their hands on the switch, they go...crazy...”

--*Moneyball*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jjf1O4jMqeM> (2:00-3:54)

John W. Henry II, principal owner of the Boston Red Sox