

Hi All,

We haven't had a Teaching Academy "Food for Thought" piece since the beginning of the summer, and as we get ready to begin the fall semester, I wanted to share the brief piece below that really made me think about some of the assumptions I make about grading and how to give out points in my classes. Some of you may have seen it already, but I wanted to share this with the group at large. Also, the original article referenced by the piece below begins with a concise history of grading in US universities over the last 300 plus years that many of you may find interesting.

The original article is Schinske, J. and Tanner, K., (2014). Teaching more by grading less (or differently). *Cell Biology Education—Life Sciences Education*, 13 (Summer), 159-166. and can be found here: <http://www.lifescied.org/content/13/2/159.full.pdf+html>

In particular, this quote from Schinske and Tanner sticks out for me: "Perhaps at best, grading motivates high-achieving students to continue getting high grades—regardless of whether that goal also happens to overlap with learning. At worst, grading lowers interest in learning and enhances anxiety and extrinsic motivation, especially among those students who are struggling."

What do you think? Does this reinforce or challenge your own grading philosophy? No need to reply, but I think something we all need to consider from time to time.

Cheers,
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Four Key Questions about Grading By Maryellen Weimer, PhD

There's an excellent article on grading in a recent issue of *Cell Biology Education-Life Sciences Education*. It offers a brief history of grading (it hasn't been around for all that long), and then looks to the literature for answers to four key questions.

1. **Does grading provide feedback to help students understand and improve their deficiencies?** The grade itself is feedback, but generally it is accompanied with faculty comments that justify the grade and offer suggestions for improvement. Most of us know the problem here, "The grade trumps the comment," as one researcher cited says. Students tend not to read the comments; they look at the grade and get on with life. Not all research supports that conclusion. In some studies, students report that they do read the comments but often struggle to understand the feedback, and they don't always know how to fix what we identified as a problem. As a result, the same mistakes occur in subsequent assignments. Grading feedback is not as effective as we might hope.
2. **Does grading motivate students to learn?** Not really. More often, grading motivates students to focus on grades. If learning is part of the equation, it happens more by accident than design. Pass back an exam and

everywhere you hear the question, "Whatcha get?" Nobody is asking, "Whatcha learn?" This analysis of grading and motivation offers an even bleaker conclusion. "Grades can dampen existing intrinsic motivation, give rise to extrinsic motivation, enhance the fear of failure, reduce interest, decrease enjoyment in the class work, increase anxiety, hamper performance on follow-up tasks, stimulate avoidance of challenging tasks, and heighten competitiveness." (p. 161)

3. **Is grading on a curve the fairest way to grade?** The practice of doing so started in the early 20th century when it was discovered that IQ scores were distributed across the population in a normal curve. "Conforming grades to a curve held the promise of addressing some of the problems surrounding grading by making the process more scientific and consistent across classrooms." (p. 162) However, grading on the curve creates other inequities. If you have a bunch of really bright students in one section, some will end up getting C's while the same raw scores will be B's in the section where ability is more widely distributed. But most faculty don't apply the curve all that rigidly. They adjust it, as needed, for a section or a set of exams which erodes the objectivity and consistency. The other problem with the curve system is that it creates competition in the classroom. When students are competing for points, it's not in their best interest to collaborate or contribute, which pretty much rules out students learning from and with each other. That works out okay for some students, but it's not fair for those who do learn well with others.
4. **Do grades provide reliable information about student learning?** This is the perennial question about what it is grades really measure and if they measure the same things consistently. The research cited in the paper documents inconsistency in grading by individual faculty members (two different grades for the same piece of work when it's graded at different times) and across individual graders. Rubrics help, but research still identifies unrelated factors that influence grading (like gender, ethnicity, and knowing who the student is, for example). That kind of inconsistency isn't a problem with objective exams, such as those with multiple-choice questions, but those exams have students *selecting answers*, which is significantly different than *generating answers*. That rounds us back to the question of what kind of learning grades really measure.

We grade students to give them feedback, to motivate their learning, to see how they compare with other students, and to measure their learning—all reasonable purposes. "However, much of the research literature [reviewed in this article] suggests that these goals are often not being achieved with our current grading practices." (p. 163) Yes, that's a pretty scathing critique, but it's well documented and our answers to questions this central need to be accurate.

Reference: Schinske, J. and Tanner, K., (2014). Teaching more by grading less (or differently). *Cell Biology Education—Life Sciences Education*, 13 (Summer), 159-166.

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