

Skill-Based Grading Strategies to Get Beyond The “Grading Game”

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Introduction

“I guess [the purpose of grades] is to track progress and measure understanding, but in a lot of situations, we are just doing stuff for the grade - which I think is why so many people cheat on tests and copy assignments because we don’t need to understand it, we just need a good grade.” This quote from one of my students, and a co-author of this abstract, exemplifies the frustrations of many students and teachers regarding common grading practices in high schools. Before I altered my practice to incorporate more skill-based grading, students were focused less on learning and more on playing the “grading game.” I resented their desire for point accumulation and my never-ending piles of ungraded assignments. These frustrations prompted me to join an administrator-proposed study of the book *Grading for Equity: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classrooms* (Feldman, 2018) in 2022. Equitable or skill-based grading practices strive for validity and mathematical accuracy, prevent biased subjectivity, increase transparency, and emphasize internal motivation (Feldman, 2018; Wormeli, 2018). Skill-based grading practices can include but are not limited to minimum grading and 0-4 grading scales, standards-based grade books, retakes, weighting more recent performance, and grades based on content knowledge rather than other performance indicators (e.g., participation, extra credit) (Feldman, 2018; Vatterott, 2015). As a result of my participation in the book study, I resolved to incorporate these modern grading practices into my Manufacturing Technology courses at Philomath High School in Philomath, Oregon, an approach that has yet to be studied empirically or discussed extensively in my context.

How it Works

In December 2022, I began incorporating elements of skill-based grading into my Introductory and Advanced Manufacturing Technology courses (i.e., primarily welding). Below are key changes of how I have incorporated skill-based grading into my classes thus far.

Practice	Example
Point Reduction & Elimination	Assigning fewer points to assignments (1-4 scale to assess weld quality); Ungraded formative assessments (bell work and exit tickets, usually drawing or describing welding symbols, are not graded).
Repeats and Redos	In welding, students are required to complete five welds by the end of the term. Students can repeat welds as many times as needed to earn the best score possible.
Self-Assessment, Metacognition & Scaffolding	Student conferences create conversations about their work and encourage self-assessment (using the 1-4 scale). I pose questions about how to make improvements. I use scaffolded instruction (e.g., reading/interpreting weld symbols) and the repeated practice of skills needed (e.g., various weld beads, measuring, material inspection) that build to a summative project.
Content > Behavior	Participation, attendance, or behavior is no longer graded. This new grading structure focuses on the <i>skills</i> students need to develop, eliminating any bias regarding their work effort. They also know the qualities and standards being evaluated, so they are motivated to meet those, rather than simply trying to work their way to a good grade.

Results to Date/Implications

Since January 2022, I have incorporated skill-based grading practices into ten different assignments in my Manufacturing Technology courses. Since implementing these changes, one difference I have noticed is that students have not asked, “What do I need to do to get a good grade?” Once they understand the grading culture, it is actually much easier for the students and me to focus on skill development. I have also noticed a shift in my conversations with students from grade-focused to content-focused (i.e., they are more motivated to produce higher-quality welds). This may be because the self-assessments and mini-conferences allow students to know exactly where they stand in terms of a grade in the grade book.

As a student, I (co-author and former high school student), have noticed a lot of differences in Mr. Traini’s grading practices. I think most teachers have a set grading scale that makes grading easy for them, but hard for students to keep up with, which is just normal. Most of my teachers don’t give feedback, just grades. Last year in Shop, I do think you had to understand how to weld but it felt like we were just running beads over and over again trying to make them perfect and when we were docked points, we didn’t always understand why or how to make it better. Now we learn what qualities we are looking for in a weld and how to improve or troubleshoot when our welds don’t have those qualities. When we self-assess our welds, he asks us what score we would give our beads and why. He asks what qualities are missing and how we think we can do better. Things are also scaled a lot lower. They aren’t worth as many points, so they don’t affect our overall grade in the class, which helps with confidence and wanting to learn how instead of just doing it to check a box. Now we do it to learn from our mistakes, because those mistakes are actually making us better, not ruining our grades.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

I plan to continue evaluating my current practices and integrating skill-based grading practices into my instruction. My next priority is to critically examine assessments. This will include adjustments to the way I approach the safety test as well as the addition of appropriate ungraded formative assessments. I also plan to incorporate more self-evaluative activities into my classroom. I strongly recommend that other Manufacturing Technology instructors consider implementing skills-based grading practices. However, adopting these strategies takes a cultural shift in your classroom. It is crucial to communicate all shifts in grading to students and gradually establish new norms regarding ungraded activities and assignments. This communication should be extended to parents as well. I advise practitioners to revisit effective classroom management methods, especially if they have previously used grades as a behavioral management tool. Lastly, I will continue my learning by leading a small group when the school-wide book study begins next academic year.

Cost/Resources Needed

The primary resources needed to incorporate equitable grading practices are the time to read relevant texts like Feldman’s (2019) book (\$35 to purchase the book), reflect on your current practice, and revise your instruction to accommodate equitable grading strategies.

References

Feldman, J. (2018). *Grading for equity: What it is, why it matters, and how it can transform schools and classrooms*. Corwin Press.

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Wormeli, R. (2018). *Fair isn't always equal: Assessing & grading in the differentiated classroom*. Stenhouse Publishers.