

The Uncertainty of Grades: Portfolios to the Rescue

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Grading students' writing is probably one of the most dreaded aspects to being an English teacher. However, it is one of the most important roles of our profession. In our society, grades are the product of education that students' futures depend upon for either advancement or failure. Knowing this impact, the teacher must determine how to fairly assess the student in a way that will allow them room for error. The answer to this, consequently, is quite problematic, especially when grading writing. Many other departments are based solely on the regurgitation of knowledge by way of multiple-choice tests. Writing, on the other hand, requires the student to produce thoughtful ideas in a coherent, logical fashion. If the students cannot just simply bubble in answers, then the teacher cannot just check off items that are wrong. Instead he/she has to devise a way to evaluate students' writing, which is quite problematic.

Grading writing as a whole is under an enormous amount of scrutiny. The notion that grades are a valid indicator of student success is becoming less acceptable. The whole concept of a grade is misleading because there are no set values. Therefore, teachers today are now questioning how beneficial placing a grade on a paper is at all to a student. Many believe that we could actually be hindering the student by having a single letter represent their work. Regardless of the effects that result from grading, many institutions still insist that they are a necessary part of the educational system. However, there is a possible solution that caters to those who are deeply invested in grades and to those who see them as a problem. "Just because conventional institutions oblige us to turn in a single quantitative course grade at the end of every marking period, it doesn't follow that we need to grade individual papers" (Elbow 193). This form of evaluation is referred to as portfolio grading. Within this system, the final grade is based on the process rather than a cumulative score of various underdeveloped papers. "Portfolios become vehicles for reflection in which learners examine where they have been, where they are now, how they got there, and where they need to go next"(Porter 34). This not only promotes learning about writing, but more importantly it focuses students' attention

on the strategies they adopt along the way. By concentrating on their continual progress, students are given several opportunities to develop their writing skills, which is more conducive to learning than single paper assessment. Portfolios may not completely rid us from evaluation, but they can eliminate some of the problems that come from grading.

One such issue that arises from grading is that it encourages extrinsic motivation. Grades are able to motivate students by convincing them to believe in the superficial qualities that they possess. However, they cannot possibly explain a student's overall ability, even though, that is exactly what they attempt to represent. When students perform in accordance with this notion, they reinforce the need for grading. The emphasis on grades throughout the years has caused such an attachment to them that to wean students of this dependency would induce feelings of confusion or possibly even worse, cause them to become reluctant learners. Students are so heavily invested in obtaining these extrinsic rewards; they lose sight of the learning process itself. Ironically, grades, as a form of extrinsic motivation, do not necessarily prove to be beneficial for those who receive good or bad grades. "Oddly enough, many 'A' students also end up doubting their true ability and feeling like frauds—because they sold out on their own judgment and simply given teachers whatever yields an A"(Elbow 190). They get so wrapped up in the quantitative grade that they lose sight of what is important, learning. When students are constantly being evaluated they feel as though they need to meet the needs of the teacher, rather than following through with their own revision ideas. The teacher then reinforces this behavior by rewarding the student for making the requested changes with a high letter grade. By compensating them in such a way, the students will feel as though they are doing what is required of them to receive an above average grade. Regardless of how the student may feel about the teacher's comments, he/she will act in accordance with those suggestions in order to ensure the desired grade. They abandon their own thoughts about their paper so they can accommodate the teacher's needs. As a result, "the student's sense of control over his/her paper is lost, which leads to feelings of alienation from their own preferences" (Kohn 204). They feel as though their work is not their own, which dilutes the satisfaction they might have felt from accomplishing the task.

Some students may work hard for grades, or as stated above, sell out for grades, but what happens with those students who receive less than perfect marks on their

papers? To those students, grades act as a form of punishment, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy. “Rather than working hard to receive an ‘A,’ they gradually drop out, first psychologically and later physically” (Sager 22). These students need encouragement, which is something a letter grade cannot provide for them. The grade just simply discourages them from trying harder the next time due to their fear of failing. But writing is about failing and making mistakes. Even professional writers cannot produce a “final product” in a couple of attempts. They produce several drafts over a period of time before they perfect their papers. With that being said, why then would we expect students with less writing experience to successfully produce a final draft after a couple of attempts? By focusing only on the final product, both high and low achieving students are failing to see the big picture, which is their competency in writing. In order to be fully engaged in the writing process, students need to be less preoccupied with the final product and concentrate more on the process that contributed to their success or dissatisfaction.

By portfolios placing more emphasis on student progress throughout the course of the semester, the students will be more intrinsically motivated because they know their grade depends on how hard they’re willing to work over time. “Students are motivated by the need to satisfy their individual needs” (Porter 20). Portfolios support individuality by allowing the student to dictate how they want to pursue their learning. Thus, learning becomes the students’ responsibility rather than the teachers. Also, by having more autonomy, students can choose what information they will or will not include from draft to draft. “Learners’ awareness of their personal control over thinking and learning processes promotes higher levels of commitment, persistence, and involvement in learning” (Porter 35). When students are invested in their own writing, their desire to learn is dramatically increased. The reason for this being their overall enjoyment in what they are writing. Any time a student is more interested in a topic they will be more intrinsically motivated to accomplish the task, but more importantly they will learn about their writing processes through a topic of their choice. “No longer are students completing an assignment for the teacher or the letter grade or because they will need specific information or skills when they get to a higher level” (Porter 35). Under portfolio assessment, the teacher takes on the role of the facilitator and the students take on a more commanding role over their papers.

Portfolios also contribute to student motivation by encouraging them to adopt new strategies or ways of looking at their writing. “Constructing meaning is an interactive process that requires risk-taking because intellectual growth is supported by poor decisions as well as good ones” (Porter 44). Students need to make mistakes in order to understand what does and does not work in their writing process. Portfolios also permit trial and error by changing the role of the teacher. The teacher becomes a facilitator to learning as opposed to dictating what should be learned. “They provide feedback and support, but do not dictate the path of the revision” (Straub 223). In other words, the teacher may supply the student with helpful suggestions, but that does not imply that those have to be addressed in the revision process. The students must decide for themselves if they want to take those comments into consideration when revising their papers. With that being said, when a student attempts a different approach to writing and fails, it is not the teacher’s job to reprimand him/her. Instead, the teacher is to guide the student through these difficult times. A more accepting attitude towards possible errors is required of the student as well. They must not get discouraged if one of their strategies to writing does not work because it will contribute to their understanding of their own writing process. “The fear of being wrong and therefore not taking risks have impeded most learners at one time or another, but through reflection they can see the valuable role that this factor plays in the learning process”(Porter 44). However, if students decide to play it safe, they will never fully understand their true potential for writing.

Students’ preoccupation with grades is problematic due to the basis by which they are administered. “To rank reliably means to give a fair number, to find the single quantitative score that readers will agree on” (Elbow 188). However, readers often times do not agree on the same piece of writing, which causes a varying amount of responses. “For example, research in evaluation has shown many times that if we give a paper to a set of readers, those readers tend to give it a full range grades”(Elbow 188). This wide spectrum of graded responses is an injustice to the writer because it can only paint a vague picture of his/her writing strengths and weaknesses. Grading writing is often times subjective in nature, which results in an inconsistency between readers. Even if it were possible to find people with similar standards, there would still be much dispute about what is and what is not significant about a paper. One evaluator might focus more on

grammar while another might be more interested in the content of the paper. Therefore, a paper with excellent ideas, but several grammar mistakes could possibly be marked down depending on the evaluator's preference. "We can sometimes get agreement among readers from some subset, a particular community that has developed a strong set of common values, perhaps one English department or one writing program"(Elbow 189). Even though agreement does exist, it cannot represent the opinions of others due to an inconsistency in what is important in a text.

"Of course grades are biased, 'interested,' or 'situated'—always partial to my interests or the values of my community or culture"(Elbow 436). Even when standards are applied, it is the teacher that makes the final decision as to what letter grade the paper warrants. "The teacher has certain ideas about what needs to be done to the draft to make it into a 'good paper'" (Straub 235). To somewhat prepare students for a grade, the teacher may make directive comments as to what the student should or should not change about their paper. "These comments are often not the ones we want to write to help students write better" (Elbow 436). When teachers label a certain paper with a grade, they must support their reason for giving that grade. If grades, and the comments that support those grades, are not considered reliable indications of students' abilities to write, then what is their purpose to student learning? According to Peter Elbow, "we see around us a deep hunger to rank—to create pecking orders: to see who we can look down on and who we must salute" (437). Grading has become such a competition in the educational system that teachers are not basing grades on individual performance, but rather comparing the students with one another. Learning in such an environment, may cause feelings of resentment among students. They need to be surrounded by the idea that the teacher is invested in their learning process alone and not the learning of another student.

Grading writing is so unreliable that to assign a letter grade to a paper would be an injustice to the student. As stated earlier, in order to place value on students' papers all the responders of the paper must agree on a single quantitative grade. However, it is impossible for every reader to agree. "The process of evaluation, because it invites us to articulate our criteria and make distinctions among parts or features or dimensions of a performance, thereby invites us further to acknowledge the main fact about evaluation: that different readers have different priorities, values, and standards"(Elbow 192). Since

grading writing is so subjective, the students are forced to identify in one try how the teacher will determine their grade.

Portfolios, on the other hand, improve the validity of assessment and somewhat remove teacher bias by forcing the grader to see several pieces of the students' writings. "When portfolio scorers see multiple pieces by one student, they tend to have more trust in their sense of that student" (Elbow 439). With a bigger sample, the teacher will be able to see how the writer has grown and learned from previous drafts. Portfolios do not attempt to hide previous mistakes that the student might have made in earlier drafts. In fact, portfolios encourage the teacher to notice these errors as a way to examine how the student has honed their writing skills over the semester.

The use of portfolios not only allows teachers to be more effective when assessing students' writing, but they also allow students to judge their own writing more efficiently. "Students go back to previous assignments and analyze the changes, determining what caused change, and then set goals based upon that analysis" (Porter 27). By developing in our students the ability to understand what works and what does not work in their writing process, we are providing them practice for how to formulate ideas, and how to organize those ideas in a more successful way. It is the goal of portfolio assessment to explain to the students that they need to focus more on the steps they took when writing their papers and not the final product. As the students gradually work their way through the various steps of the writing process, they are reflecting on past work, but they are also setting goals for future drafts. "It is one thing to be told that we are improving, but it is an entirely different matter when we can view the changes for ourselves" (Porter 50). Students need the added reassurance that they're headed in the right direction, which is an integral part of portfolios. They foster the idea of students setting their own personal goals as a way to encourage them to achieve what they set out to at the beginning of the semester. Portfolios have proven to be a reliable form of assessment for both teachers and students.

Grading writing is not only unreliable, but it is also uncommunicative. As C. S. Lewis says, "People are far too anxious to express their approval and disapproval of things than to describe them" (Elbow 190). In other words, the grade itself does not contain information or any indication as to what the teacher approves or disapproves of

when evaluating students' writing. All that the students can learn from just a letter grade is that their work did or did not meet the teacher's expectations. However, they remain uncertain as to how they did or did not ascertain the grade they desired. "Instead of using grades or holistic scores—single number verdicts that try to sum up complex performances along only one scale—we should give some kind of written or spoken evaluation that discriminates among criteria and dimensions of writing—and if possible that takes account of the complex context for writing"(Elbow 192). By uncoupling comments from grades, the student will acquire a better understanding of their overall writing ability. "Comments look to guide the students to come up with a better written product, but they also help her get more practice in her writing product, but also help her get more practice in her writing processes and more comfortable making decisions as a writer"(Straub 242). Some may contend, though, that grades explain to the student where they stand in the class. There is nothing wrong with providing students with an idea of how they are performing, but this can only tell them that they need to improve and not how they should improve their writing. The students need more than just a letter. They need some type of feedback that will help them to understand their writing process. "But if our goal is really to provide such feedback, rather than just to rationalize the practice of giving grades for other reasons, then reducing someone's work to a letter or number is unnecessary and not terribly helpful"(Kohn 202). Therefore, it can be concluded that comments should represent the overall evaluation of the paper rather than accompanying a letter grade.

The use of portfolios for assessment has proven to provide students with a more communicative understanding of how they're doing due to their ability to supply the students with feedback as opposed to just a letter grade. Comments given through portfolios are facilitative by supporting and increasing the students' learning. Therefore, teachers are not just viewing a single aspect of one paper, but are looking over several aspects as they develop over time. "Since portfolios are mixed bags, they invite us, by their nature, to notice difference: strengths, weaknesses, within a portfolio—whether between different writing skills or dimensions" (Elbow 442). In other words, teachers are concerned less with the component parts of a paper and more interested in how the students refined their writing. Therefore making it easier to talk to the student about what

works well and what does not work well in a piece of writing. It has been argued, though, that just providing the students with comments cannot demonstrate to them how they are doing in the class. Along with comments, a teacher can provide his/her students with a grid that will provide them with more information about their progress. “Grids are a way I can satisfy the students’ hunger for ranking but still not give in to conventional grades on individual papers” (Elbow 195). The grid offers the students a general idea as to what still needs improvement. However, the emphasis in portfolio assessment is placed more on the students’ improvement throughout the semester.

The urge to rank students is so overpowering that we are losing site of what is important in education, which is learning. Also, the pressure to make the grade has become so overwhelming in the past couple years due to increased requirements for college acceptance, job placement, etc. that students are no longer concerned about whether they learn as long as they make the grade. As a result, students’ are compromising their own thoughts and feelings to receive a letter grade that will tell them nothing about themselves in the next year. As future teachers, we can combat the desire and need to rank by adopting portfolios.

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