

# The Problem with Standards-Based Grading

**By Joe McKeown,**

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Due to the influence of standards-based grading advocates like Rick Wormeli, teachers across America who once decided for themselves how to assign grades have been forced toward a new grading system that emphasizes skills assessments. The model my high school district is adopting would likely derive only five to ten percent of a student's grade from homework, class participation, reading quizzes, and so on. My district wants all teachers to undergo assessment literacy training to better understand the new approach to grading, we have been encouraged to watch a Rick Wormeli video, and teachers have been sent to hear Mr. Wormeli speak. Unfortunately, for some high school subjects, and for English in particular, standards-based grading is a bad idea based on three flawed assumptions. It assumes that teachers only teach skills and not content, that homework is always skills practice, and that grades should be exclusively for reporting what students can do against standards at the end of learning. Wrong, wrong, and wrong.

While the first assumption, that teachers teach only skills, may make sense for math, it is not true of history, foreign language, or English. Try as we might in these subjects to see curriculum exclusively in terms of skills, we do want students to know causes for the Civil War, basic French vocabulary, and the experience brought to life in *The Great Gatsby*. We want students to know *content*. Nevertheless, a few years ago, the Assistant Superintendent for Educational Services in our district argued that even in a history class the goal is not really to learn history but to get students to "think like historians." The order of events and the events themselves that students had been studying all semester, therefore, had no place on the final exam. Likewise, final exams in English classes no longer contained questions about the works studied during the semester. Students either write an essay response to a prompt not related to class content or they read unfamiliar materials -- cold reads -- and answer questions to test their comprehension and inference-making skills. This determination to see content-rich classes as teaching only skills is in keeping with the way that educational consultants tend to discuss teaching as if all classes are math.

In English, we do teach skills, of course. We teach writing. But the other half of a typical English class is literature and, as hard as we might strain to see with Wormeli-eyes that skills like comprehension and inference-making are why we teach literature, these are not the reasons. We do not study great literature to hone our analytic skills but because these stories have value; they are worth internalizing. They put us into the lives of other people and force us to struggle with human conflicts – better, clearer renderings of significant conflict than sometimes life itself provides. Literature gives us necessary experience for living. True, as students study more literature, they get better at recognizing literary devices and they learn to make better inferences. As important as these skills may be, though, more important for students is that they have for the rest of their lives something of what Shakespeare wanted to give them in *MacBeth*, for instance, and that they begin to appreciate the benefits of reading great literature.

Once one accepts that literature has value, the notion that all homework is practice makes no sense. It comes from the idea, again, that all subjects are math. After all (say the experts), a student who has mastered algebra should get an “A” whether or not he/she practices his/her algebra for homework. Why penalize a student for not doing what he/she doesn't need? However, English teachers assign pages in *To Kill a Mockingbird* not so students can practice reading, but so they will share in the vicarious experience that is fiction. If every reading assignment were merely for students to practice reading skills, then this argument put forward by one education consultant would make sense. She said that English teachers should stop trying to use grades to motivate students to read. If students didn't read the novels being assigned, teachers could still assess their comprehension and inference-making skills with novel excerpts and shorter pieces. In her view, the reading skills are what matter, so we should find materials -- any age-appropriate materials -- students are willing to read for practicing those skills. It is like saying we give children food so they can practice chewing. They don't want nutritious meals? Let them eat Skittles. This attitude supposes that great authors have nothing important to say, and that *Hamlet*, *Les Miserables*, and *As I Lay Dying* are the English class equivalents of dead cats in biology lab.

The third mistaken assumption being made by standards-base grading advocates is that grades should be for measuring student skills. In fact, teachers have always used grades for more than that, and with good reason. Many students are lazy, and when they discover that homework won't count toward their grade -- that it is considered practice for those who need it -- they won't do it. Even in math class, students with low skill levels are often not mature enough to do the nightly practice they need without the promise of something in return. If homework counted for more, then more students would do the work assigned and more students would improve their skills. Even highly competent students might discover that practice sharpens skills. After all, virtuoso musicians and Olympic athletes still practice, and no employer is happy with a worker who stops working after stipulated tasks have been completed. Beyond the fostering of skills, teachers should be fostering a work ethic in students. If teachers cannot give credit for work completed, students will work less, they will be less accomplished in the skills being taught, and they will be less likely to realize the value of persistent effort.

In content-rich classes, grades that reward work are even more important because students need incentive to read outside of class, and this outside reading is especially important for English classes. In a typical high school English class, students spend roughly half of each quarter studying a major literary work, like a novel. During those weeks, most class time is spent considering details of the story as the class progresses through it, but for students to benefit from that in-class work, they need to be reading 12 - 30 pages each night (depending on the difficulty of the story and the grade level of students). Once students realize that only 5% of their final grade comes from reading quizzes and homework on reading, even students who see

the value in reading will find excuses not to do it. What's more, the reading for English class differs from the reading assigned in other content-rich classes in that literature is not a vehicle for getting to a destination. In a significant way, the reading in English class is the destination. Whereas nightly reading in Physics and American History may increase a student's learning, students in these classes are ultimately responsible for knowing facts and ideas, not for reading. Students could conceivably skip or skim much assigned reading and rely on lecture notes or other means for acquiring information. We do not read literature to learn facts, though; we read it to add to our store of significant experience. A *Sparknotes* plot summary is no substitute for reading *The Great Gatsby*. Since, in an English class, the act of reading itself is what students must have, and because not all students are the responsible, motivated lovers of learning that some education consultants imagine, English teachers must be able to count reading quizzes and reading responses as a significant part of a student's grade.

Just as teachers should differentiate instruction to match the needs of each child, education reformers should differentiate between the courses they mean to improve. Not all subjects are math. Some teach content as well as skills, and teachers in those subjects need to use grades to motivate students to acquire that content. Good teaching, after all, means squeezing out of students as much effort as possible on tasks that matter. Grades have always been leverage for that squeezing. They should not be for college admissions officers to judge student skill levels, and grades should not be for helping district administrators measure teachers against each other. No, teachers should be free to use grades as they always have: to indicate skill levels, to indicate mastery of course content, and to motivate students to work. In English classes especially, grades that reward students for reading are essential for teaching literature.

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