

## TEACHING

# To Drop or Not to Drop: A Well-Tempered Discussion

AUGUST 15, 2010 *Shawn*

Recently, I asked the question, “Is it ok to employ the grading practice of dropping the lowest score?” Many of you responded with eloquently worded comments. It’s pretty obvious that we’re all over the board on this one, and I think you may find it surprising that I am not wholly against the practice (as perhaps I led on), but to me it’s more about being **Picard, not Data**.

The goal of this blog is to force myself to think cogently about why I do the things in my classroom that I do. Last year I came to the terrifying realization that teaching matters and can actually permanently affect other people’s lives. I’m sure I acknowledged this fact from day one, but I don’t think I truly had the fear of the **power** then. This is why I must agonize over the things I do with my students. This is why I must come across as a bit too intense.

For those of you who are assuming I’m always being a jerk about the traditional system of assessment, I’m sorry that I’ve come across that way. All I’m trying to do here is make sure you and I actually believe in what we’re doing and aren’t just dropping lowest scores or giving random tests because, well, that’s what was done to us. I’m sorry that I make some of you feel defensive; I just want you to be absolutely sure that what you believe in is worth defending (read: good for your students) and not some crusted ideal curve handed down from the great Statistics Perverters of yesteryear.

Here’s the recap:

Most of you espoused the “bad days” argument, wherein the teacher acknowledges that some days a student may screw up and that may inaccurately reflect their true understanding due to a breakup or illness or whatever. Problem: What if that low score is not the result of a bad day, and is in fact a giant flaming red flag indicating that the student needs some serious help on this concept?

Dropping the lowest score can lead to:

... When I was a student I would use it [dropping the lowest] as an opportunity to skip a class (or not learn specific material).

-Zach Shiner

Thank you, Zach, for rocking the anecdote. This is the problem that prompted me to post this in the first place. A clear dichotomy is starting to form...

And then, like Tyson in the fifth:



## SHAWN CORNALLY

### Curriculum Vitae

Hello! I teach physics, calculus, object-oriented programming, and gastronomy at a rural Iowa high school. I also moonlight as a lecturer at the University of Iowa.

I love curing bacon, the Oxford comma, and getting students into the narrative arc of a lesson. I hate traditional grading, non-sparkling water, and being boring.

Yes, I want to be a part of your next project: shawn dot thinkthankthink at gmail dot com

I do NOT speak for the Solon Community School District (IA). They don't swear as much, not even close.

@ThinkThankThunk

## BLUEHARVEST

I built this so we can all grade nicely together:



www.BlueHarvestFeedback.com

*The drop-the-lowest-grade idea might help give students hope, so that they don't give up early on.*

- Dan Greene

So, we recognize the need for students to be allowed to improve, and for their final grade to reflect that. Hmm, there must be something wrong with summative obsession and averaging...

*The underlying, pernicious assumption, alas, is that the "average" is a suitable indication of overall student understanding.*

-Tim Erickson

Wha, what, what?! Averaging isn't sufficient? Who knew!? What I think we're getting at here is that when you say, "I want you to get better at that," the traditional assessment scheme undercuts you by implicitly saying, "oh, but I really don't want you to get better, I want you to follow my arbitrary schedule of topics, and I want your grade to reflect every horrifying and embarrassing mistake you ever make."

Oh, did that offend you? Well, that practice offends your kids, but they usually don't verbalize it. That's scary.

Bethea then raises some pedagogical issues:

*Above all, it [dropping lowest] lets the teacher off the hook. No need to meet with a student and explain material that you won't be going over again, when you can just say "don't worry, your lowest grade is dropped."*

-Ms. Bethea

Stop reading, go get some coffee and think about that one for a long time. Really turn it over in your mind. Spend some time slumming in the seedy underbelly that Bethea is trying to expose with that quote.

If you read the rest of the [comments](#) (which I strongly encourage) you'll get a healthy conversation about averaging. Which is really the underlying assumption for many grading schemes.

What I want is for us all to see this dichotomy to its natural maturity. We have a rift going here between those of us who want to consider ourselves "progressive" and those who are willing to work within the traditional system to try and get some learning done. Obviously, there are great teachers on both sides, but I think we've finally touched upon something that cannot be agreed-to-be disagreed.

## Learning Indication vs. Points Accumulation:

As usual, the state of Iowa shows up in spades:

*Dropping the grade doesn't mean the info was ignored. Just means that grade was dropped.*

## BLOGROLL

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Always Formative

dy/dan

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What does Russ mean? The “info” he refers to is called feedback. Think about the assumption Russ is making here, and how those assumptions indicate that he must be a badass teacher. He assumes and practices feedback with grading, and can’t even seem to imagine a system where the points matter this much to be even having this conversation. Perhaps Russ has already left us for the Elysian fields of assessment, but he makes a fantastic point: who cares about the points, if the student got the information about how you think they’re doing? Awesome.

The fight here is really about what you want to communicate with that grade, and you have to think about it, for the sake of your students. Do I want them to accumulate a grade all semester that will either be a monkey on their back or a soft padding to ease end-of-the-year lallygagging? Or, do I want them to know that their grade reflects what they know, how well they improve, and how well they retain?

Here’s how I see dropping the lowest grade from a student’s standpoint:

1. Collect as many points as possible in whatever topics you want, often never knowing what you know or don’t know, and hope test questions will be about topics you’ve managed to “get.”
2. Dropping the lowest grade means I can ignore important material altogether, if the teacher chunks assessments like most teachers do.
3. Dropping the lowest means that points have no connection to learning and really are just an accumulation game.
4. If I have more than one bad day, I’m totally effed.

Obviously, this blog is in the what-they-know camp. This is also why I had to switch to a dynamic standards-based system:

1. In SBG, lowest grades represent the current level of the student, dropping them destroys important information.
2. In SBG, lowest grades can be erased from the grade calculation when a student demonstrates higher proficiency. (This satisfies the “bad day” argument.)
3. The only way to “collect” points is to know something; points map to learning targets which in turn map to a final grades.

So, do I agree with dropping the lowest score? Only if you’re using a dynamic system that has replaced that lower score with a more accurate picture of how that student is now doing on that topic. This is of course impossible to do if you’re not mapping your assessments to specific standards, and are instead just giving random numbers of questions just to fill the 20 minutes a quiz “should take up.”

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Welcome, KCRG Folks!

Inquiry Stylee: Google SketchUp

Comments are disabled.

15 thoughts on “To Drop or Not to Drop: A Well-Tempered Discussion”

**JB says:**

AUGUST 19, 2010 AT 9:35 PM

This has been my first week of SBG, and I’m about to blog about it in detail on “The Standard Induction” blog on wordpress.com. I teach foreign languages. It has been a

challenge to say the least and I am the ONLY teacher in the school grading this way. I am in the same boat with language issues being non-linear and I struggled to come up with my concept list and how to reconcile that with the required averaging system etc. I will have my full blog up this weekend, so if any of you are World language teachers, feel free to chime in. (I've also been dealing with the good problems of using brand new technology in a new building – Airliners, etc., so that has been keeping me from being able to blog as much as I wanted to). I enjoy reading all of your comments and I really do believe this will be the best way for assessment.

### Brad Ovenell-Carter *says:*

AUGUST 17, 2010 AT 6:03 PM

@TimErickson I hope to take the idea even further at my new school,  
<http://www.thinkglobalschool.org>

My dream is that anything vaguely resembling our current idea of assessment goes out the window. It seems to me that we have an great opportunity afforded by social media. Picture this: Teachers are hired, in part, for their capacity to evaluate and judge student performance. When they deem a student ready, they write a reference for the student, recommending them personally to another teacher or school. Because these teachers have established a reputation for excellent teaching and fair and accurate evaluation among other teachers and students through social media and an open classroom, their word is good. No grades needed. More human, I think. More accurate, too.

Report cards, gradebooks etc. were invented for the industrial model of education and worked well in a system that processed people like widgets. (You know you're still working in such a system whenever you hear reference to statewide standards or national standards.) Education is about the individual and social media gives us an opportunity to connect at this level which simply didn't exist 50 years ago (but maybe existed 100 years ago or more when relatively few went to school.)

I'm working with a colleague to develop a new model for schools that sees a federation of small schools sharing administrative functions, a core of master teachers and the web that might get us back to that personalized schooling, something like Oxford Don 2.0.

### Jerrid Kruse *says:*

AUGUST 17, 2010 AT 1:16 PM

Real quick, I think with SBG and avoiding the "procrastinating student" requires a much greater emphasis on teacher-student relationships.

### Doug Cole *says:*

AUGUST 17, 2010 AT 12:57 PM

First of all, let me say, "thank you!" for this blog. I am new to it, but I have enjoyed it thoroughly. I am planning to use SBG this year (as is every member of our staff), but I am struggling to wrap my mind around the grading in an English classroom.

I read your post about what it would/could look like in an English classroom, and I agree with most of it. My issue is rooted in the fact that English is not linear. A student may be assessed on his thesis-writing ability 8 times throughout the year, so what is to stop a student from blowing of an assignment or two if he knows that he will do well on the final assessment? With the system of using the most recent performance assessment, I see this being a possibility. Does anyone have any ideas how to handle this?

**Shawn** *says:*

AUGUST 17, 2010 AT 6:27 PM

@Doug: That's a fantastic question, and is asked more often than you'd think. I think you have to ask yourself why you are giving an assessment that only covers redundant material? I can only assume that you're moving on and that while the essay will indeed have a thesis, there must be some new topic that needs to be demonstrated, and that can't be done without writing a thesis.

I have rarely run into the procrastinator or the list checker-off-er, I've found that students love using their mastered abilities on new things. Some students will be jerks, but not nearly as many as you may have been having with the traditional system.

Thank you for the comment; please keep us all apprised as to how your year develops!

=shawn

**Tim Erickson** *says:*

AUGUST 16, 2010 AT 11:55 PM

@Brad: You lucky dog! Sounds as if some hard work paid off for you and your school. An inspiration.

Part of me would love to give up summative assessment entirely. Do I think that SBG is only a step in that direction? Not necessarily. Imagine a world with no final grades: everybody is intrinsically motivated — including us. Would we maybe want to implement something like SBG in order to inform our practice? It's so easy to be wrong about what a kid knows; I'm looking forward to this partly as a data-collection exercise to help me figure out, for my own soul, if anybody is learning anything.

**Brad Ovenell-Carter** *says:*

AUGUST 16, 2010 AT 12:00 PM

Hi Shawn,

I understand there are practicalities. But you either take them as they are without question, which is often what we must do, or you seek to change them; why then take half measures?

At my previous school we had three report cards a year. All were anecdotal only, although the final report gave a letter grade as required by our governing authority, the provincial ministry.

It took two years and many many parent meetings to get to the anecdotal-only reporting, but I feel the investment of time and resources was a good one. Generally speaking, our students were less focussed on grade and more focussed on learning.

I should say as well that our assessments were outcome based, so we never came close to doing something like dropping lowest scores (which to me implies some sort of averaging or number crunching.) What I mean is that if a student is doing "B" work (let me use that for a shorthand here, without prejudice to my overall argument) at the end of the term or year, then that is what the student gets as a grade. There is much more teacher judgement involved here, which I think is a good thing. Almost all of my

assessment was formative; I only gave 6 summative assessments all year and they played only small part in my reporting to parents.

### Brad Ovenell-Carter *says:*

AUGUST 16, 2010 AT 10:26 AM

That we're having this discussion at all says we haven't really changed our thinking. The question of dropping lowest scores is moot. We really ought to be asking whether we should be collecting scores at all. When was the last time you gave grades, dropped lowest scores etc. your own children as they learned to talk, walk, tie their shoes and so on? Grading is a artifact of an industrial model of education. It worked well in its day, but that day is ending. We can do better now.

### Shawn *says:*

AUGUST 16, 2010 AT 10:59 AM

@Brad: That's nice, but I have a hard time believing that performance indication is going completely out of vogue everywhere. Here at Think Think Think we're all about feedback and developing students independent of grades, but in the end all teachers are forced to report out something smaller than a portfolio full of feedback. I'd love to hear and solutions that you have for having to give grades at all.

=shawn

### Tweets that mention Think Thank Think » To Drop or Not to Drop: A Well-Tempered Discussion -- Topsy.com *says:*

AUGUST 16, 2010 AT 8:20 AM

[...] This post was mentioned on Twitter by Erin Waggoner, Deron Durflinger. Deron Durflinger said: Should teachers drop the lowest grades for students?  
<http://bit.ly/dDxWv4> #vanmeter #edchat #sbg [...]

### Jerrid Kruse *says:*

AUGUST 16, 2010 AT 12:46 AM

Oh, Shiner – I did the same thing in a graduate course – Organic Synthesis. Just didn't even try on the final exam. When I went to pick it up the prof said "You shouldn't have done that". If I was as gutsy as I am now I would have said, "No, YOU shouldn't have done that." :)

### Jerrid Kruse *says:*

AUGUST 16, 2010 AT 12:44 AM

While this blog clearly accepts that standards are pillars of understanding crucial to the content of the course, agreeing on what those pillars are is quite tricky. Some people will look you right in the eye and say that a student MUST be able to name each phylum in order to truly understand Biology. I disagree. I would even go so far as to not only ask "why these standards", but "why this course?"

All these questions about how to assess what we teach, why not question the things we teach?

I'm just pushing – don't mind me.

**Shawn** says:

AUGUST 16, 2010 AT 6:55 AM

@Jerrid: Love the comments. I agree totally. Half of the time I leaf through my book while smirking about how awful some of the content is. Do I really expect my students to become physicists? Or would my time be better served just trying to figure out how a lawnmower works?

Same goes for math. Why the hell do kids have to take algebra II? It's ridiculous that stats is considered "upper" while parabola-fiesta is considered "lower."

=shawn

**Z. Shiner** says:

AUGUST 16, 2010 AT 12:33 AM

@Jerrid: Standards (as in school/state/adopted standards) are different from the standards in SBG – the SBG standards are what you come up with as the quintessence of the subject you teach (see [this](#)).

On another note, now that I think closely about it, the one class which I most clearly remember implementing the 'drop the lowest score' technique was a comp sci class. Being a mathematician, the gist of computer programming is pretty simple (program=algorithm; summation=loop; binary=modular arithmetic; etc.) The class had 5 quizzes with the lowest one dropped. After the first 4, my lowest score was a 19/20. Since I didn't exactly care about the material at that time I merely stopped showing up to class after that. Of course I regretted that decision when I took a job as a programmer the next year.

**Jerrid Kruse** says:

AUGUST 16, 2010 AT 12:13 AM

I think I probably lie more on the "work within the system" side of things, but I hope for the "completely change the system" side. I find that small changes are something each and every one of us can do where we are, and if enough people start doing these small things, the whole thing changes. I wrote a post that outlined my efforts to implement more authentic grading within the traditional system that may give some folks some ideas on how to move toward the ideas you discuss.

<http://educatech.wordpress.com/2010/04/01/grading-shift-toward-understanding/>

In addition to sharing my own story, I want to raise a question with which I have been wrestling. Why "standards"? You mention not being able to do "this" without "mapping your assessment to specific standards". I wonder who makes these standards important and why? One of my standards in Earth Science was something like, "Identifies the properties used to classify minerals". Ok, I can teach that, but why? Is this a fundamental science idea? Perhaps a better standard would be, "Makes use of and recognizes the benefits of organizing nature based on observable properties". While I

consider that to be more fundamental, I am still wondering why we have to have sets of “standards”. Doesn’t the mindset of teaching every kid the same thing perpetuate the idea that school ought be “standardized” which leads to the need to give standardized tests?

Sorry for the rambling, as you can see I’m not very clear on this question or how to answer it. My feeling is that the only thing standard in any classroom ought to be deep levels of reflective thinking on both content and the learning process. Of course that standard is hard to measure. Unfortunately, it is also not happening in many classrooms.

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