

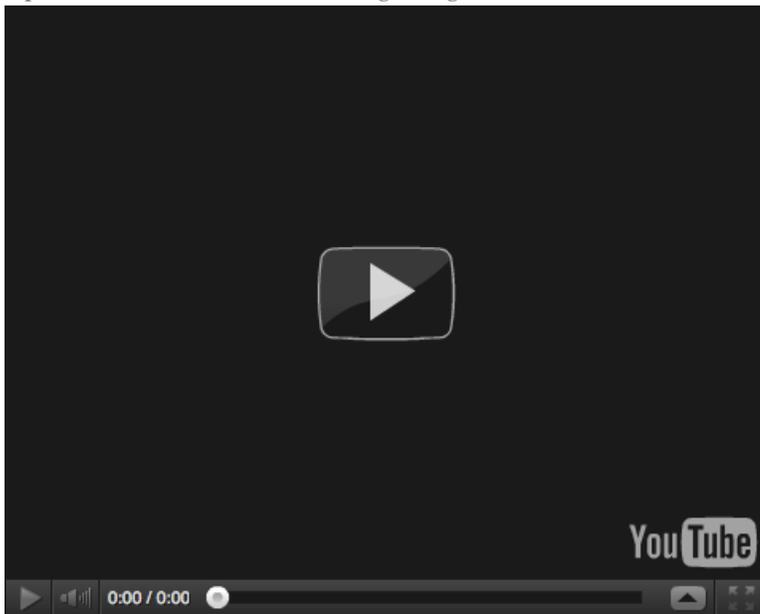
TEACHING

Standards-Based Grading: Feedback

MAY 2, 2010 Shawn

If you're screaming the word "FORMATIVE" at your screen, you're right. Buzz buzz my little jargon-bee!

Welcome aboard the Standards-Based Grading Express! I am your conductor with a ferocious tenacity for breaking the status quo of boring classrooms and disaffected students. In other words, happy Sunday morning! Actually, I'm in no way the conductor; there are about 14 million other teachers out there trying SBG, and maybe even more blogging about it (as I do a victory spin in my office chair. Fist pump assumed.) Here's an A/V representation of how I feel about the growing SBG movement:



There is one point that I think could use a bit more parsing, and that's feedback. In other words, all of the extra stuff you say/write/imply when you're not explicitly grading something. This may seem a bit fuzzy within the SBG framework, I know it was/is for me. The ultimate question being: When do you put a grade on something and when is it just for telling a student where they are (and where they should head)?

So here's where we're at: Your grade book (and thinking) have been separated into clear learning targets (standards). It is now obvious to your kids what the central themes of your course are. What's even better is that you're dynamically grading these standards to tell the kids where they are, and which ideas they should revisit; their grade is actually reflecting their remediation efforts. (OMG!) These simple changes have revolutionized my room. There's a problem, though.



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

Here's the issue: for students that do not feel the need to remediate, any grade becomes instantly summative. That is to say, you give a fantastic standards-based assignment (e.g.: A project on pre-conquest Central/South America). That student demonstrates stellar communication skills when presenting their project, they built a mock pyramid, and they even connected the spiritual-social-economic forces governing the society they were studying. But, they had all of their facts backwards. They prescribed traits of the Aztecs to the Mayans, and Mayan traits to the Incas. It's a disaster content-wise. You have standards for communication and for content. This student receives excellent grades for communication and presentation, but awful marks in the content categories. If this student chooses not to go back and unwind their understanding of these cultures — as our SBG system has indeed clearly indicated that they should — the system has done nothing otherwise for this unmotivated student.

The issue is feedback. If presentation day is the only day that you took to assess this child, and then you leave any remediation up to them, how were they supposed to know if they were on the right track? I feel almost criminal for ignoring this point up until now, but I suppose I've been assuming we already do this. After carefully pouring over some literature, it has become apparent to me that I'm terrible at feedback, and perhaps we should all take a closer look.

So the demand is this: give the student an opportunity to demonstrate their current level of understanding before it ever even smells the grade book. This is hard for me, especially when I believe in the power of the SBG grade book. I have to remember the student who may not have the maturity (or availability) to come in after school, or during their open period. Not to say that remediation is left up to the student alone, you must also work in reassessments for an effective SBG roll-out.

So, I work in these opportunities for feedback explicitly into my lessons. You probably call it "checking for understanding" or something along those lines. I actually keep a sheet going in my notebook with every kid's name on it and a check mark for whether I feel like I've communicated to them where they're at in any given topic. This feedback can take many forms, but its central feature is that it gives the student an honest assessment of where they are (without a grade) and tells them how they can get better. Examples:

1. A Quiz! Just don't put the score on it.
2. Talking! Watch a kid work a problem, or ask a kid those great questions you practiced in teacher school, but make it explicit and systematic for each cherub.
3. Bell Ringers! Or whatever silly name you give these activities.
4. Email! If this is OK by your administration, written feedback that's private, like email, can do wonders for a kid that doesn't respond to public feedback in class.
5. Google M.F. Docs! Same advantages as email, but structured in a great way.

I've been trying to get at least one check mark by each kid's name before I give out any sort of graded assessment. This has been challenging with a capital "challenging." I suppose I'm not advocating anything other than standardizing this practice so that it becomes an assumed part of your pattern. If you're screaming the word "FORMATIVE" at your screen, you're right. Buzz buzz my little jargon-bee!

.. And Good Feedback Looks Like?

Good feedback is first and foremost connected to the learning target at hand. The learning target might be finding minima/maxima of a function, and the student may have this concept down like Lewis vs. Tyson, but they just can't perform the algebra (so stinkin' common, ugh). What kind of feedback do I give? The first thing I do is to clearly indicate to the student how I feel their skill on the current learning target is developing. This is key, because this is what they're most clearly working on. I'm too often distracted by the mistakes made by the student, that I focus on them. These mistakes should be addressed, but if I only address common denominator issues, how does the student know what progress they've made in calculus? They don't.

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However, I do want them to get better at the algebra concepts. In calculus, I include standards for advanced and common algebra techniques. So, in a way these become a part of the SBG machine. With regards to feedback, I often inform the student that they have an algebra error, and invite them to revisit that specific concept with me. All too often more than one skill is wrapped into one grade, and the student has really no idea what they can and can't do. This is a recipe for piss-poor study habits and feelings of magic surrounding grades. You do not want that.

I've found the best way to give good feedback is to provide a narrative of what you think they did. This often scaffolds their understanding, because it puts their work (which is often muddled) back into your more concrete understanding of the concept. This narrative approach is entirely extensible to almost any kind of learning you're trying to get at. Here's an example:

I once had a student turn in a draft of a PowerPoint presentation (yippee ppt!) She had done an analysis of the spring constants in different Nerf toy guns. She had worked through some sample calculations and presented her project in a pretty simple and straightforward way. In the end I asked the students to highlight any "physics" that would be pertinent to their project. She just listed emboldened words from the book. Not my intention at all.

I wrote back on her sheet the narrative that I thought went along with her project. When I got to the "physics." I said something the effect of, "...and now you're listing random words from the book. You just finished giving me a fantastic description of what you did and why it was interesting. You talked about how hard it was to standardize your procedure so that all the guns would be measured the same way, but in the end you gave me a list of words. I wonder how these relate back to the process you just described."

She had no idea that's what I had wanted in the first place, and If I had let her turn this in as an assessment, how is it fair to assess that misunderstanding? She was just parroting because she'd learned in other classes that listing crap sometimes gets you points. This ungraded feedback resulted in a much better later assessment of her true understanding of the basic physics principles that can describe a Nerf toy.

What's It All Mean, Basil?

Feedback should be clear to your standard. It should relate to the student your impressions and not just back to some (possibly mystical) ideal that they're not aware of. If you can manage it, feedback should also happen before a grade ever materializes. This helps to empower students leading into any type of assessment, and can really help those students who choose not to take advantage of the SBG model.

Oh, and If you didn't watch the Youtube video at the top, that was a mistake. Turn up your speakers.

I am indebted to Susan M. Brookhart for her article in [Educational Leadership](#) entitled *Feedback That Fits*. January 2008, Vol. 65, No. 4.

As always, a little love to [Chancellor Townsley](#).

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4 thoughts on "Standards-Based Grading: Feedback"

Natasha Nance *says*:

MAY 27, 2010 AT 3:02 PM

Really awesome writing! Truly!

Matt Townsley *says:*

MAY 2, 2010 AT 6:31 PM

Uh...sorry for pasting the entire text. I was hoping to paste in a small quote. Feel free to delete that comment, Shawn.

I meant to just paste in:

"The issue is feedback. If presentation day is the only day that you took to assess this child, and then you leave any remediation up to them, how were they supposed to know if they were on the right track?"

...followed by my comments:

Bingo, Shawn. It is possible that a teacher could embrace standards-based grading and allow for re-assessment, but if the students don't have the motivation and/or schedule to actually re-assess, it might as well be re-named "standards-based summative assessment." Providing multiple opportunities for feedback BEFORE the recorded/graded attempt just makes sense. I believe it is the aspect that really makes this whole process tie with the formative assessment movement and in turn change the culture of our classrooms. Thanks for writing about this topic in an entertaining and engaging way. :)

Karl Fisch *says:*

MAY 2, 2010 AT 5:38 PM

Here's a link to that [Ed Leadership Article](#)

Great post. I'm still trying to figure out how to find the time to give them some more formal feedback before that first score goes in the gradebook, but I'm working towards it. And I'm anticipating my feedback-giving-skill next year is going to be sorely rusty and/or lacking, but at least you've given me even more reason to work at it.

Jason Buell *says:*

MAY 2, 2010 AT 12:38 PM

Hi Shawn,

We've already had the beginnings of this conversation over on my last [post](#) so I don't have a lot to add/elaborate other than recommending the book *How to Give Effective Feedback to your Students* by Susan Brookhart. Its the article you cited plus a whole lot more. The article is essentially an excerpt. If you haven't gotten it, get it.

I also wanted to followup that the second crucial part is time to act on that feedback. In class and under guidance. Feedback alone isn't enough. So they need clear targets, feedback regarding where they are, feedback regarding their next steps, and then time to act on that feedback.

Great post and I'm glad you're doing your part for the SBG world. Keep evangelizing.

