

TEACHING

Standards-Based Grading: Lowering Grades?

JUNE 1, 2010 Shawn

This is about as original as I get. I'm well aware that all things under the sun are not new, and I will remind you that this blog is a autobiographical historical comedy more than it is SBG evangelism. That said, in my SBG system, sometimes kids' grades move *backwards*. (read that last sentence again after hitting play)



Here's why:

1. Grades should indicate what you know now, not what you crammed and purged a month ago.
2. The danger of a backslide really enforces the kind of responsibility that is impossible to teach or grade explicitly.
3. Homework and studying become customized and what I always dreamed they would be
4. The midterm/final can't "sneak up" on a kid

Let's have a little chit-chat about why these are good and bad ideas:

1. Learned vs. Crammed

For:

Obviously, we want kids to actually learn the things we teach. This process can be duped by what any teenager will tell you is a fool-proof method for getting A's: cram and forget.



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

Everyone has their pantheon of stories. They stayed up until 2 a.m., drank a pot of coffee, a pitcher of tea, and the blood of the highly nocturnal opossum. They then ran to class, took the test, crashed, and woke up wondering if the whole thing was just a really lucid dream. This is not the kind of learning I want for my kids.

What SBG gets me is a dynamic look at these understandings. I want to give students a chance to overcome a “bad day,” and I want to get a better picture of my crammers as well. This means that as the semester goes on, I bring back standards that we’ve already covered. I assess them, and they get the grade based on where you are right now.

Against:

This might seem contradictory, but giving kids their most recent score can also be harmful. In the end, that just gives you a single-shot look, which is bad. Or is it?

Here’s what happens: I initiate a reassessment. Girl is having like a totally awful day because her boyfriend broke up with her after only 2 weeks for that hose-beast Bridget. Girl loses ability to command vectors, and assess poorly despite her proficient performance a few weeks ago.

What this means to me is that in a state of duress, the kid’s score can go down and does not accurately reflect her abilities, or it means she really did regress and her attention must be focused on vectors. This confusion is bad. Very bad. However, because you’re an SBG monster, the student can initiate a reassessment to make up for this, and all is not lost. Working this system out is the hardest thing to do, and will be totally unique for your brand of students. (Mine are totally Prada, btw)

2. The Responsibility Monster

For:

Responsibility is that kind of word that makes every teacher convulse into a frothing teacher’s-lounge rant, one that often weaves a tapestry of such visceral profanity and frustration that it can still be seen hanging over Lake Michigan hours afterward (holla’ Christmas Story). SBG has helped me to promote responsibility in my class. Why “promote?” Mostly because responsibility can’t be taught. It can be modeled, it can be emphasized, but it’s an intrinsic thing. The kid has to feel the need to make a good decision.

SBG says, “Hey, this is your grade. You want to let your knowledge atrophy? Then your grade will, too.” Most kids take this new sense of control and run screaming into the wind with it, showing it off and reassessing in way I never would have thought of on my own. I see kids poring over books, that would otherwise have been playing video games. This is why the fear of the backslide must be ever-present but not used as a teacher-weapon (you know who you are.)

Against:

Grades going down makes some kids quit. Cut and dry, some kids cannot afford to quit. They are in a situation where there’s a hairline difference between being in school and being on drugs or dropping out or name your specific at-risk problem here. This is why SBG must be tailored to your specific population. My kids tolerate the backsliding of grades because my culture of reassessment is rigorous and free. You may not want that. Student-initiated reassessments might make you queasier than a corn dog followed by the tilt-a-whirl. That’s fine, and maybe backsliding shouldn’t be a part of your SBG implementation, yet.

3. Finally, Some Real Studying

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I feel a little silly putting this here, but I’ve been asked about reproducing this blog’s material more than once, so here’s the copyright info: United States fair usage applies. An [email](#) would be nice for anything using more than a few paragraphs.

For:

When kids know they're responsible for retaining, and — this is key — they know *what* they're responsible for retaining, studying becomes a guided missile of academic awesome.

This is often the trouble with high school kids. They know they should study, but they see a 1,000 page book full of information that is all equally enigmatic. Do I need to know about one-sided limits more than rationalizing limits with radicals? They don't know, they haven't been teaching calculus for years. SBG provides them this road map, and then refuses to play the role of full-service gas station. I like that.

Against:

This one is so easy I'm surprised Buell or Cox hasn't already commented before this post has even been published: A list of standards is damaging to the big picture. What about the things that don't make the standards list? What about the tangential enriching things? My only response is: it better be obvious how in-class activities are connected to increasing their abilities on the core standards. This requires a pile of planning and really well written standards. Better than grading homework, to be sure.

4. Summative Assessments

For:

SBG and backsliding prevents tests from sneaking up on students. How many times have you heard, "I totally get it, but when it comes to the test, I forget." I question their usage of the word "totally."

The way I view SBG is like a sandbox. We used to give students day-long or week-long sandboxes, saying, "Here figure this out take a quiz take a test, aw too bad you didn't get it let's move on OMG COVER THE BOOK"

The SBG sandbox is much wider. Mine lasts all semester. Didn't get it, kid? Take some time. The real deadline is the one forced on me by the semester schedule. There'll be a midterm, and a final. Get it by then, or else we'll assume you might not. This gives them the time and opportunity to really flesh out understandings. Yes, we're moving forward in class, but that kid can spend their SBG dollars wisely on where they need the most improvement before the looming summative evaluation.

Against:

Reassessing makes kids soft, like little marshmallows floating in a sea of Cool Whip. **I do not buy this one bit.**

Also, some of you will argue against summative assessments altogether. I had a hard time with this, but eventually came to the conclusion that there must be an end, and why not make it the end of the reporting period? Finals are great management tools, too ...

Others of you only grade homework and never give quizzes or tests. I'm really really interested in how this works. Mostly because it rubs me the wrong way, but if your students aren't calling for a mutiny, then something must be working.

What's It All Mean, Basil?

I sincerely believe that a system that allows for the reporting of improvement should also allow for the reporting of regression. SBG is not as damning as the summative-obsessed system of yore. Information about regression is often welcomed by students, so that they

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know where to spend time before finals.

Thanks for the tweet that inspired this post, @JamiDanielle.

Episode V: Striking Back With Students In Mind

Mandelbrot Redux: Day 2

Comments are disabled.

30 thoughts on “Standards-Based Grading: Lowering Grades?”

Tyler D Reese *says:*

SEPTEMBER 29, 2010 AT 9:57 PM

Thanks for all the great info you have for the new SBGer, I want to get it implemented but it is 4 weeks into the school year. How can I do this without ruffling too many feathers. How do I start SBG after the school year has started? Any advice?

Shawn *says:*

SEPTEMBER 30, 2010 AT 6:17 AM

@Tyler: That's how I started. I began SBG with about 5 weeks left in the year. I just told them that this is how it's going to be now, I explained my reasoning, and they all seemed to love it.

=shawn

Tyler D Reese *says:*

SEPTEMBER 27, 2010 AT 11:44 PM

I am going to be doing a weighted average of the students last three assessments, something like 55% from the most recent, 30% from the 2nd oldest, and 15% from the 3rd oldest. This shows that students need to maintain/improve upon their mastery. I also will be giving a “summative” assessment every 6-8 skills as another mode of demonstrating mastery... any thoughts?

Shawn *says:*

SEPTEMBER 29, 2010 AT 9:22 AM

@Tyler: This sounds very Marzano-ish. I like the idea that the most recent information is the most valuable, it shows that you are thinking about how assessment affects your students, which is all that really matters. I would argue that keeping older grades damages some students, especially if you're inclined to put in zeroes. So, I suppose, as with all systems, there are ups and downs. Thanks for the comment!

=shawn

Standards Based Grading « **Mr. Anderson's Blog** *says:*

JUNE 9, 2010 AT 11:09 AM

[...] Cornally – Standards-Based Grading: [...]

jalzen says:

JUNE 7, 2010 AT 10:48 AM

Thank you for the commentary on regression. I like that it's used as a direction for what students need to study for the midterm/final. Then that summative test at the end of the term actually measures what the students have learned overall in the class and can affect each objective differently. This year our midterm/final was still a final percentage rather than different objectives. I don't know that I'll get to implement regression yet. My school stressed out when I suggested even moving to a more sbg scale. I only talked them into 75/25, but that's improvement.

Brendan Murphy says:

JUNE 3, 2010 AT 9:02 AM

Thanks Jason for pointing out the Marzano trend. I too like the idea of weighting the latest grade a bit more.

If I were still teaching middle school math in my own classroom I would definitely attempt to implement SBG. I don't have my own classroom and I'm currently working towards an administration certificate. I would love to say hey we are changing the grading system in this school, but I'm pretty sure there would be a revolt.

The real problem though is I know many students would see a score of 7/10 and be satisfied. The next score might be a 0/10, but most likely a 5/10. This small slide means to the students nothing, but of course to us it means a failure.

Next the parents will call the school board, the board will call the school and demand the teacher reinstate the 7/10. No amount of explanation of SBG will sway the decision.

In the end if the grade isn't changed it still doesn't matter, the student will be passed on and handed a diploma.

In my own classroom I would figure out a way to motivate the students, but how do I motivate the teachers to motivate the students?

Shawn says:

JUNE 3, 2010 AT 7:24 PM

@Brendan: I suppose, depending on the climate of your district, this may happen. Although based on my purely circumstantial evidence, this has never happened. A student has assessed lower than a previous attempt on the order of 300 times during my SBG courses, and never once has a parent called or alerted the school board. I can totally understand your point, but I think you give parents too much credit. In a given class there will be anywhere between 10-100 standards, and no parent is keeping track of that many scores. If they are, they are a member of a freakish minority, and we all know that SBG doesn't negotiate with terrorists.

=shawn

Jason Buell *says:*

JUNE 2, 2010 AT 11:40 PM

@Riley – Marzano proposes using a power law if you want to compute a true score based on multiple assessments. I have a formula in a book at school I can DM you. I still think in the end whenever we use a formula to make our decision, we're distancing ourselves from the responsibility of grading. I'd prefer to just own the grade I give.

@Kevin...

In this [post](#) by the Science Goddess I really like her use of sparklines and bullet graphs to show student progress (or lack thereof).

David Cox *says:*

JUNE 2, 2010 AT 9:17 PM

Kevin

Agreed. That's why I *do* use the most recent.

Kevin Feal-Staub *says:*

JUNE 2, 2010 AT 7:33 PM

@David: I understand that we often are required to report a single grade... I guess I think we should spend some serious effort in lobbying that our schools eliminate this requirement.

While we DO have this requirement, though, it's got to be possible to find a holistic way to look at the years worth of progress towards learning targets that is different than averaging... if there are three assesments on understanding the concept of an inverse function, and they show a growth from little understanding to great understanding, I'd like the final report to only contain the data about the most most recent, and highest achievement. Conversely, if a student regressed, and at the end of the year could NOT demonstrate understanding of a topic they seemed to have been on top of earlier in the year, I think the summative report should reflect the most current data that shows that the student hasn't mastered that topic.

It's fun to think and write about this stuff, but really hard to implement it!

Matt Townsley *says:*

JUNE 2, 2010 AT 6:04 PM

"My best solution is to simply replace old with new and if a student thinks they are getting the short end of the stick, then prove me wrong."

Yes. Yes. Yes.

Riley *says:*

JUNE 2, 2010 AT 4:21 PM

It's interesting to realize that I'm clinging to averaging as a way to reduce the power of any one assessment. I'm so afraid of an imperfect assessment that I don't want to rely on the most recent one. But you're right, averaging a bad assessment in will keep its ill effect around instead of getting rid of it. Augh, I don't know what to do!

David Cox says:

JUNE 2, 2010 AT 2:46 PM

Riley

If a student goes from a 0 to a 4, I'd say that it could be an accurate description of the student's knowledge. Going from a 4 to a 0 is another story. I have a tough time believing a kid can go from proficient to having absolutely no understanding. Now with that said, we may need to compare apples to apples on what a 0 means and what a 4 means and how we arrive at that score.

I completely agree that this is an imperfect system using imperfect assessments which are interpreted by imperfect people. Averaging holds a kid back if they have a bad day and doesn't reward new learning like I think it should.

My best solution is to simply replace old with new and if a student thinks they are getting the short end of the stick, then prove me wrong.

For the record, I am with you and **Kevin both with regards to *the grade*. I've said for the past 15 years that teaching would be awesome if it weren't for grading.**

David Cox says:

JUNE 2, 2010 AT 12:50 PM

Kevin

How do you propose reporting a student's cumulative grade (as required by most of our districts) without the use of some sort of number scale which will then be converted to a letter grade?

Riley says:

JUNE 2, 2010 AT 12:44 PM

@David: If one is giving 4/5 and the other is giving 0/5, clearly you can't use either as a full picture of a grade. However, just because a kid forgets something on a test doesn't mean he really has no idea about it, and I wouldn't feel comfortable saying that he is completely ignorant when he might just need a jog of his memory.

It's hard because you can't know what the kid knows – you can only look at his knowledge through your tests. Your tests aren't perfect, but you still have to make a final declaration.

@Shawn: what method do you use to combine data?

@Kevin: I feel you. I haven't found a good way to condense a whole year of math into a single grade (<http://larkolicio.us/blog/?p=182>). You should start a blog and start working on it with us :)

Kevin Feal-Staub says:

JUNE 2, 2010 AT 11:55 AM

I've just found "blogland" and am so happy to now get to know a group of colleagues who are in the midst of a substantive discussion re. SBG. I have been working on a system in which I use a database to track each of my student's mastery (or lack thereof) of the identified concepts and skills in a course. The foundation I'm building on is primarily based on two parts: 1) a student should not be penalized for taking longer to

master a concept (or skill), and 2) When a student doesn't master a concept, it should be noted and addressed, not hidden underneath a grade of 79.2% or whatever.

What I'm wondering about in many of the posts above is the frequent use of number scales (1-10, 0-40, etc.) I think that the SBG system will really only flourish when we directly and explicitly convey the message "Student X is able to do this, this, and this, however, she can not YET do this or this..." I worry that as soon as one rates the achievement of a standard out of 40 points and uses a scale to convert that to a letter grade for a report card, the power of the information SBG can provide is lost.

David Cox says:

JUNE 2, 2010 AT 9:18 AM

Riley

What's the chance that a student goes from a 4/5 to a 0/5? One of those scores is likely a fluke and my miney's on the 4/5.

Shawn

So you *don't* let the new replace the old? By *gathering new data* do you mean you hold on to all scores for a grading term and use them to determine a final mark?

Riley says:

JUNE 2, 2010 AT 7:53 AM

re. "I just let the new score replace the old."

I don't like it, for reasons itemized by Jason. A big advantage of SBG is the clarity of communication with students, and going from a 4/5 to a 0/5 in one day seems almost like a betrayal. On the other hand, I don't want to disregard the possibility that the 4/5 was the fluke and the student actually knows nothing about factoring... tough situation!

Shawn says:

JUNE 2, 2010 AT 8:46 AM

@Riley: That's exactly my dilemma. Sometimes I feel a kid has gotten a score by accident or maybe even by less scrupulous methods, and then their grade swings wildly down the next assessment. In the end for me the answer is collecting as much data as possible to get an accurate picture = reassessing as much as is reasonable.

=shawn

Jason Buell says:

JUNE 1, 2010 AT 10:09 PM

re: Summative assesments – I'm middle school so I don't give a final exam. I've been thinking about this one a lot and so far here's where I am:

You need to decide if the kid's score on a final exam overrides what you thought was their previous level of learning.

If they bomb a final does that undo everything they've shown you previously? I'd say sometimes. Sometimes they're clearly sliding for whatever reason and the final is just

confirmation. On the other hand, you've been assessing them all the way up to the final and they've shown strong mastery. For whatever reason they blow the final. In that case, you're perfectly within your rights to say, You know what? You had four other finals today, you're tired, your parents are going through problems...this final was not a good indicator of your current level. I know you know the stuff. Let's leave your score where it is.

Jason Buell *says*:

JUNE 1, 2010 AT 10:08 PM

True story: Once got in a full fledged argument with Debra Pickering (of Marzano et al) about the dangers of telling kids learning goals. I was wrong about it. You know what convinced me? I realized that the learning goals were as much for me as the kids. I was just kinda teaching with no real plan. We had fun along the way but my kids didn't learn a damn thing. Nothing really connected and we just seemed to be running really fast but not going anywhere. I'd get to the end of unit and think back on what we did and write a test. It was awful.

re: Big picture. My argument is that having those helps me focus on the big picture. As teachers we often get caught in a trap of spending sooooo much time just grinding them on vocab and drills without ever linking back to the main goals. If you're grading based on those main goals, you have to constantly keep them in mind and as the focus.

I was going to take this up in two more posts, but now since you've got the ball rolling: A key thing to remember is that a test/quiz is only ONE indicator. It is impossible to know what a student knows with 100% accuracy. In the end, I'm just taking my best guess at what you know. If I adjusted your grade back down, prove to me that I'm wrong.

@calcdave – Two things to help with parents/students.

1. Be up front about it. Let them know you'll be reassessing everything and that scores could slide. No surprises when it comes to grades. Ever.
2. If the kid's test or whatever indicates he/she needs a serious downward adjustment, go have a conversation with the kid. I ask a few probing questions to make sure I'm right then I explain I'm going to adjust the score down and what he/she will need to learn to bring it back up.

In the WSIM podcast Shawn says something to that effect about making grades more humane (treating students like people). Having that conversation goes a long way to that.

David Cox *says*:

JUNE 1, 2010 AT 3:01 PM

Riley

I just let the new score replace the old. It keeps me from having to worry about averaging and gives a snapshot of what kids know right now.

With that, does having a summative test from time to time take care of the *backsliding* issue? I mean if I set up my grades so that 10-20% of the overall grade is based on summative, don't you think that addresses the issue of the student who has filed the information in short term and dumped it?

I'm proposing giving may be 6 summatives next year on skills 1-9, 1-18, 1-27, etc. Each summative retains the old skills but picks up new ones. In this case, I still think allowing the new score to replace the old would be appropriate. What say y'all?

Riley says:

JUNE 1, 2010 AT 1:55 PM

Next year I will definitely allow backsliding. I've realized that the premise that students who have mastered skill X in October will be students with a mastery of skill X in March is faulty (in my class).

What I haven't settled on is a natural way to weight reassessments convincingly. Averaging doesn't seem right. A best-fit line seems like a good idea until I consider the fact that I can really only afford to test kids on each standard two or MAYBE three times (maybe I need to reconsider THAT, and spend more time on formal assessment).

So, while I'm convinced that taking the maximum of all scores as a final score is not ideal, I have not found anything convincingly better. What do you all do?

David Cox says:

JUNE 1, 2010 AT 1:19 PM

Yeah, that's what I'm getting at. I have found the same thing re: asking kids where they think they are. It's a tough sell at first due to the point harvesting they're used to, but by the end of the year, kids get it.

The differences between levels of understanding is what I'm really getting at. So for a kid to score a 10, she must understand process and applications—got it. But how do you set up the reassessment for that level? Having a student reassess on a process is easy since we are really looking to see if the kid can use the tool.

Giving multiple opportunities for assessing abstract application seems to be a different animal because once a student sees a problem requiring abstract app, it's not so abstract the second time around.

Maybe with your level of kids, that may not be so difficult. I'm trying to figure out how to do this with algebra and below.

Shawn says:

JUNE 1, 2010 AT 9:55 PM

It's rough, and sometimes doesn't go that well. Often kids stagnate at 9.5 or 9, and it's up to me and some future lesson to bring in a real opportunity for that 10 to come out, if the kids takes it. Otherwise, and this is pure honesty here, everything from 6.5-8.5 is me just using my "professional opinion." Not that it's anything different that what's already happening in rooms across America, but I think this is more helpful. You might be a perfect applicant for the 4-point scale a la Matt Townsley.

=shawn

CalcDave says:

JUNE 1, 2010 AT 11:03 AM

So their grades and chute or ladder until the end of a grading period (6 or 9 weeks or something)? Then that part is set in stone on their report card or do you ever go back and change after report cards come out?

Can/do your students' parents check their grades online or otherwise in real-time? Have yours bought in to the concept that their cherubs' score could slide?

Shawn says:

JUNE 1, 2010 AT 12:01 PM

@CalcDave: Yup, their grades "chute and ladder" until the end of the semester. I allow reassessments on any topic at any time. However, as time goes on, we usually zero in on that student's real ability level. Some kids on some standards will just never get to a 10. So the question becomes, how well do they understand it? This is a data acquisition issue that SBG really helps with.

I tell my parents and kids the first day how this is going to work. The parents like it because I emphasize learning and the kids like it because they think it will be "easier." Ha. We use PowerSchool and the parents can set up email notifications for grade changes, newly-entered scores, and all of that. Most just check once a week. I've never had a parents question why a grade went down, because every standard is displayed before them with their kid's ability level right next to it.

David Cox says:

JUNE 1, 2010 AT 10:52 AM

Well since you asked...

The only question I still have, I asked a while back...If you have a standard that is worth 10 (or 40) points, what's the difference between an 8 and a 9 or a 34 or a 35?

Shawn says:

JUNE 1, 2010 AT 11:47 AM

@Cox: For me, the total points just represent the relative importance of the standard. Most things are out of ten for the simplicity of using on 10 numbers. I few things get 40's, and then some scores are off limits. I usually only assign 5-10 by half points, and when using the 40-point scale that just moves up to count by 2's. The 40 is really meaningless, I could just weight those standards higher, but this confuses parents and kids, so I just use a bigger numbers.

What those numbers mean is the question I think you're really asking, which is way harder to answer. For me, a 10 represents complete mastery of both a process and its abstract applications. I then go down by half-points from there. Sometimes I even have the kids tell me where they think their work is at, so that I can see what they think numbers mean. It's not as hippy-dippy as it sounds, because with SBG they know that lying is a waste of time, and they'll just get reassessed later anyway.

