

TEACHING

Standards-Based Grading: The Role of the Summative

JUNE 24, 2010 *Shawn*

Oh me oh my. Let's test our SBG mettle: What's the point of the summative test within the framework of standards-based grading?

Summative assessments are just that, a one-shot attempt at summing up a student's abilities across a wide variety of content standards. They generally occur at the end of giant piles of coverage (units) in the form of midterms, finals, or "unit" exams. They're a static measurement; a single snap shot often used to damn or laud a student in a magical way. Some kids accidentally underperform, some kids accidentally overperform. In short: These tests are flawed, and we all know it (Good, I can feel your anger... Strike me down with all of your hatred and your journey towards the ~~dark~~ SBG side will be complete.)



I'm not making any money, George; (I'm a teacher) thanks for the photo, though.

Summative used to be then end of the assessment story.

Yeah, you threw in a few quizzes here or there, you know, for flavor, but what you really said was, "learn it for this test, and be damned if you didn't. Doubly, who cares if you retain it?"

SBG fixes this, personalizes education, and makes it more effective. It's not perfect, though: we can sit around smoking Vitamin M and talking about, like, the universe, man, but in the end, if it doesn't help my kids extend their learning usefully, I don't care how fancy the acronym is. SBG must be tempered logically for the good of your students.

I AM NOT implying some half-assed partial implementation of SBG where you still sort of **grade homework** and you attempt to make "Attendance" (barf) a legit standard.

What I'm saying is that you have to stop acting on rote indoctrination and start to think



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

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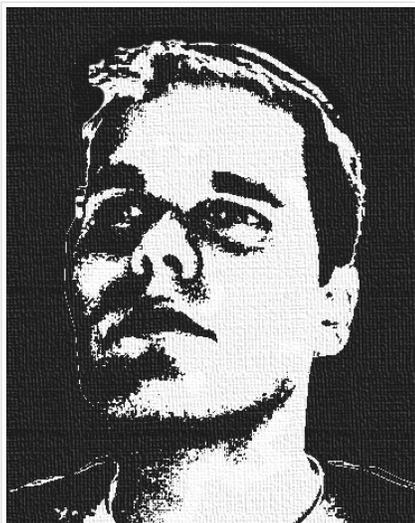
I built this so we can all grade nicely together:



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about what assessment actually tells you. Assessment is a huge part of a student's life at school, it can dictate their attitude towards education in general — it can enhance or ruin a kid's day — and yet we're willing to give assessments flippantly, because "it was about time for a quiz." WTF does that even mean?

So, at this point it sounds like I just hate all assessments, call me the Che Geuvara of education. Actually, call me Princess Paradox: I give a midterm and a final.



¡Viva la SBG!

<indignant reader>"But you use SBG, and your kids redo things all the time what will they think if they can't be allowed to get better OMGITHINKIHAVEATUMOR!!!"</indignant reader>

Evidently there's mini conference about summative assessment bubbling up through fizzy lifting machine that is the Internet: [Jason Buell](#) (the one beta tester to rule them all) supplies these nuggets for us (while simultaneously using a strike-through joke, which I thought I invented...)

Remember this: Finals are just one more piece of evidence. It is up to you to decide if that evidence overrides all of your previous evidence. ...

... In this case, you, as a teacher and a human being and not a Scantron machine, is ~~able to required to~~ morally obligated to make a decision.

Aside: We are treading on the inherent usefulness/wikipedia-ness question that surrounds blogging, here. Is quoting another blogger good enough to support something I myself am about to say? Maybe. Señor Buell is running a classroom, and, as far as I know, he hasn't devoured or otherwise ended a student, yet. This combination of experience and willingness to stick his neck out on the Internet is good enough for me to assume some veracity and glean usefulness. Of course, all anecdotal evidence is just that: anecdotal, and evident.

Jason's logic is infallible here, indeed any assessment is a measure of a student's ability. Even if sometimes we may feel like Pellinore hunting the Questing Beast in trying to get an accurate picture. What does it mean if a student's abilities spike? What does it mean if their scores keep raising? What does it mean if they are seemingly random?

Just to whet your appetite, here are some screen shots from the SBGradeBook, each one represents a student that has followed a much different path on their road to proficiency of the same standard. For illustrative purposes let's say they're in "Advanced Lasso

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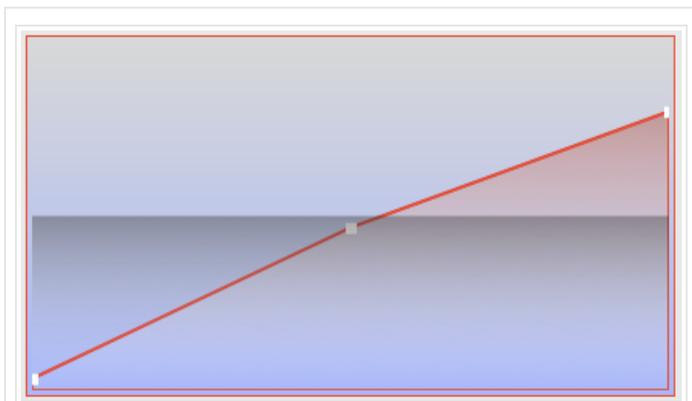
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I feel a little silly putting this here, but I've been asked about reproducing this blog's material more than once, so here's the copyright info: United States fair usage applies. An [email](#) would be nice for anything using more than a few paragraphs.

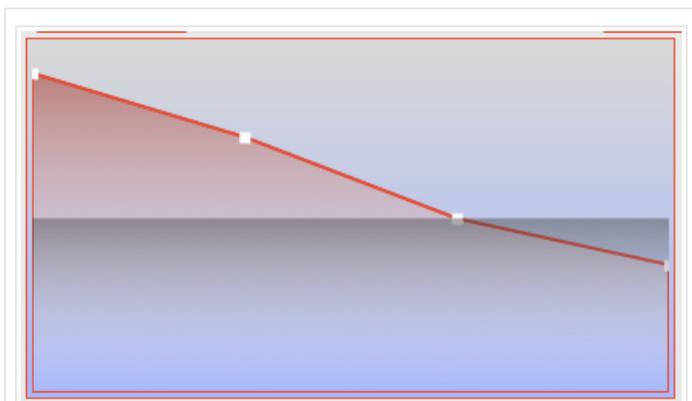
Techniques” and this is the “Bronco Ropin’ Standard” (The dark gradient represents the proficiency line, and yes these were produced on-the-fly by the SBGradeBook, it does this new thing called “graphs.” Hang on, Steve Jobs is on my other line ...)

Johnny:



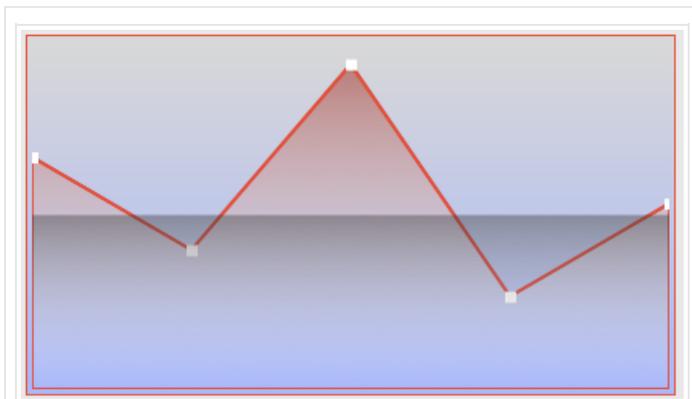
Thanks to SBG, Johnny's grade now reflects his recently proficient abilities in Bronco Ropin'

Jezabelle:



Thanks to SBG, we are all now keenly aware that Jezabelle has fallen off the Bronco Ropin' wagon.

Jam Master Jay:



Seriously, Jam Master Jay? How am I supposed to interpret that?

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So, what's a teacher to do when each of these kids scores the same on the final? Swear vigorously? A final is as summative as it gets, there's no retaking, getting more data, or otherwise talking it out. (I think that's why they call it a "final.")

You have to go back to your philosophy of teaching and learning and have a quiet walk-through-the-forest moment: Why did you give a final in the first place? Tradition? *ERRZT* wrong answer. Because your school requires it and has something called “finals week?” *ERRZT* only one strike left. Because you wanted a last chance to take some data about how the kids have pulled the whole thing together and retained knowledge from the beginning of the semester? DING! DING! WE HAVE A CHICKEN DINNER.

This final does not have to be a test, it’s whatever you and your kids do to sum things up, but it is summative. There’s no going back. You have to be so clear with the kids about how important it is that they accurately present themselves, but I’m sure they already understand that, having been indoctrinated in all of their other classes to fear and respect assessments as if they were McCarthy’s agents.

Say It With Me Now: Retention!

So, for me, the role of the summative assessment is actually to give me a larger picture of a standard I don’t explicitly grade: Retention. I give a summative midterm and final in all of my classes, and it’s because I want the kids to know how well they do or don’t **retain** information. The larger SBG structure is designed to help them prepare, reassess, and otherwise learn to be actual people who think about what they don’t know. These pin-prick summatives are the bit of me that knows I have to get them ready for the testing aspect of college in a meaningful way.

My approach has always been to add the summative scores in as a separately weighted category ancillary to my behemoth category called “Standards.” Most often final grades are composed of 85% Standards, 7.5 % midterm, and 7.5% final.

Why the fractional percentages? I just don’t think it should be possible to get an A without being able to retain more than half of the material in some way. However, knowing the inherently flawed nature of a single-shot assessment, I have left the A- wide open for that kid that wants to work their butt off to get their standard’s scores through the roof.

Am I rewarding responsibility with a grade? Hell Yeah. Am I doing it by grading homework and “participation.” Hell No.

Surprise! My Wife is the Good Teacher, I Just Plagiarize
Standards-Based GradeBook: Open Season!

Comments are disabled.

10 thoughts on “Standards-Based Grading: The Role of the Summative”

Deborah says:

AUGUST 9, 2010 AT 4:25 PM

Thank you – I call it a parent letter also. I will look it over – I just felt I needed a model that had been tried.

Frank Noschese says:

AUGUST 9, 2010 AT 4:08 PM

Whoops. My previous comment should read: “(and you can see that HW is NOT there)”

Frank Noschese *says:*

AUGUST 9, 2010 AT 4:07 PM

Here you go:

<http://tiny.cc/fnoscheseSBG>

It's aptly titled "Parent Letter."

I specifically do not mention the ungraded homework policy in my letter, but I do mention it at Parent's Night b/c I can put a better spin on it in person.

Since I tell them what IS graded (and you can see that HW is there) I don't think it's a problem. Of course, I might be wrong. Let me know!

Deborah *says:*

AUGUST 9, 2010 AT 3:54 PM

Actually – if anyone of you is doing SBG and no homework do you have a syllabus/letter that you use to explain this grading policy.

Deborah *says:*

AUGUST 9, 2010 AT 3:53 PM

OK – Shawn after 20 years of teaching and 10 years of complaining I am ready to try SBG! I need some concrete information though. I must use the schools grade program. I can create task groups – which I think I will set up a group for each standard/objective. AS I do my more frequent and targeted formative assessments I will change the grade in that group – assuming and hoping that students will improve. So there grade reflects their understanding and achievement of that standard at that moment. Right?

I am even going to bite the bullet and not grade homework!! This is going to be difficult – but as big a change as it is – I agree with it.

QUESTION 1 – am I on the right track with my gradebook?

QUESTION 2 – do you have a copy of your syllabus that I might see to help explain this to parents, students and administrators? My admin's are very supportive and are actually thrilled to hear that I am going to do this.

The History of Algebra, part II: Unsophisticated vs. Sophisticated Tools « Research in Practice *says:*

JULY 9, 2010 AT 5:12 PM

[...] algebra, Galois, Gauss, Math History, Proof benblumsmith 6:11 pm Math ed bloggers love Star Wars. This post is extremely long, and involves a fair amount of math, so in the hopes of keeping you [...]

Kevin Feal-Staub *says:*

JUNE 24, 2010 AT 6:22 PM

Disclosure: I'd like to eliminate the reporting of a single summative grade altogether. I think frequent standards based assessments will help a student and teacher keep track of a student's strengths and weaknesses and let each know what needs to be

accelerated and what should be remediated.

At the end of a course, the record should still show what that student knows and doesn't know...what she is and isn't able to do. Condensing all that SBG information into one letter grade is so painful for me.. AARGH! OUR SCHOOLS MAKE US DO IT!

Anyhow...I like your idea that we need to assess for things other than skills, understandings and knowledge. As I move into the work of SBG (maybe I should start a movement to rename it SBA since I'm so opposed to summative Grades???) I'm struggling with how to assess "habits of mind" like perseverance, collaboration, listening with understanding, etc. While retention is not really of the same ilk as the habits of mind I mentioned, it does deserve attention. I wonder, though, might it be better addressed by putting a review item on each quiz as we go through the year and keeping track of how well students retain throughout the year. This way there is a running record with multiple measures assessing retention, rather than a single "final retention exam" measure.

Kevin Feal-Staub

[Math in the News – Integrating Current News Events into High School Mathematics Teaching](#)

Theron *says*:

JUNE 24, 2010 AT 6:07 PM

I was reimagining my 'summative' assessment as a last-ditch opportunity for students to show progress on their weakest standards; four half-hour tasks picked from a menu of sorts so that the kids can customize their final. Does that tie my hands on assessing the other standards for retention? Maybe, or maybe I just create a policy of automatic re-assessments on egregious errors and elegant insights.

Tim Erickson *says*:

JUNE 24, 2010 AT 5:55 PM

You go, guy! Meanwhile, you're so wise I have to ask you something that's been bugging me: Your comment about 7.5% suggests that you adhere to the "90–100 is an A" convention. True? And if so, why? (Some possibilities: it's just a score, so what does it matter? or: hey, you gotta pick your battles, and SBG is more relevant)

Shawn *says*:

JUNE 24, 2010 AT 9:39 PM

@Tim: Yea, I use the standard A-F 10% grade scale for pretty much the reason you indicated. In the end I'm more interested in learning and teaching actual accountability and proper habits. SBG gets me those things, and I need to have at least one thing that ties me back in to how the rest of my school grades. Pick your battles indeed.

@Theron: Whatever works for your kids, do. I would be careful assuming retention though. Kids are little crammer-and-purgers. The most accurate picture has the most resolution.

