

## TEACHING

# The Danger of Edu-jargon: SBG's Birth Cry is its Death Knell?

JULY 18, 2010 *Shawn*

There are some who can already hear the dirge being played as standards-based grading is drug through the streets to be buried among the rest of the edu-jargon. Why are their ears so much more attune to this than the rest of us who are just now jumping on board what is purportedly a soon-to-be hearse?

Perhaps they are jaded from too much experience with mercurial edu-trends. I know I am, and I'm a fairly young teacher.

Perhaps it's a fear of the wildfire-contagious kool aid imbibing that happens so easily in educational circles. You know exactly what I mean. It goes like this:

**Teacher A:** I just did this thing with my kids where I care about them and listen to where they are and help them to the next level! I'm going to call it "learninating"

**Teacher B:** Hey, your students are really happy, what did you do?

**Teacher A:** It's called Learninating, all you do is grade differently! I just wrote a blog post about it, and now I'm writing a book that's going to be published with a soft cover of oddly broken concentric circles and a sweet modern font that can be easily marketed at education conferences!

**Teacher B:** Hey, I'm going to call what I do "Learninating" too, and hopefully my kids will be happy and get 102% on the state exam!

**Teacher B:** (Two days and a half-assed implementation later) Well! Hurumph. That didn't work. Teacher A is full of it! OoOoOoh, what's this new "self esteem" thing . . .

In what seems to be an amazingly common turn of events, we end up opening the buried pedagogical treasure to discover the same old things that we always uncover. What's worse, is that Teacher B rarely changes their methods, if ever. They just re-label them. This re-labeling does nothing but create logistical headaches for Teacher B that often consist of writing the new edu-jargon phrase on a bunch of folders with expensive Sharpies. There's no philosophical shift here, and I bet you can guess what happens? Epic failure. People see this fake implementation and the lack of effects and decide the whole thing is rubbish. Teacher B then moves on or reverts. This is the frustrating life cycle of edu-jargon.

As soon as something catches on, everyone jumps on board. They aren't philosophically primed. They haven't had that moment where they have to walk in the woods and hope they come out alive. This lack of shift usually culminates with administrators wanting to make sure they don't sound stupid at conferences, so they re-label "quizzing" as "formative assessment" and call it a day.

!@#%. That pisses me off.



## 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

# I Refuse to Let Anyone Kill SBG.

Do you understand me? This is too imporant. This is too grass roots. This is too close to the ideal vision I've had for my classroom to let anyone run off with the acronym and start preaching it in some sterile lecture-based methods course at some awful online pre-service program.

I don't care what you call it. Use the word "criterion," if it makes you feel smart. Use the term "learning target" if you like the aiming-a-projectile analogy. Use the phrase "Mr. Snuffleupagus wants you to relearn shit and have your grade reflect your new found maturity and understanding." I don't care.

Just don't make this about some magic set of rules that are going to make your classroom perfect. Guess what? That will never happen. Stop looking. Education is always going to be ugly. It's always going to be hard. Progress will be slow and sometimes backwards. Students are going to make you cry your eyes out on your commute home as you imagine the sabotage they're receiving at home in place of parenting.

Some magic lesson plan skeletons or some insipid list of someone else's standards aren't going to help you. Write your own damned standards and test them. If it isn't perfect, who cares? At least you're trying.

Here's how I know this is for real. I came up with my SBG implementation through conversation and thinking. I didn't read a book. I've never even been to an education conference (I thought you had to be invited up until Townsley told me you could just register). I've never even met Marzano. Someone just asked me two questions, and the rest fell into place:

"What do quizzes mean to your students? What do quizzes mean to you?"

That's it. The rest is blogified history.

## New Teachers, Ahem, Read This:

You want your ticket punched to board the SBG Express? Then ask yourself the following questions: (answer key follows!) Finding yourself in disagreement? Then you may not belong on The Express, and guess what? That's totally fine. There are millions of fantastic teachers out there reaching an innumerable amount of students who will never happen stance upon the term "standards-based grading."

If you don't like my answers, then maybe your style lies somewhere else, and I want desperately for you to find it, embrace it, and start serving your students.

Here's the customs shake down as you enter the SBG Express:

1. What's a "quiz?"
2. What should a letter grade communicate?
3. Teaching responsibility includes grading homework and notebook organization. True or False?
4. Are my students pressured to leave behind material that they don't understand?
5. Should students have the right to show me that they "get" something that they previously didn't?
6. Points vs. Feedback. Compare and Contrast.
7. Students remember what "Quiz 6" assessed. True or False.

Spoiler Alert! Here are my answers. Please check in pen so I know you didn't cheat. HA! Just kidding: Please ruminate on your answers and ask yourself if you really are doing any good forcing kids to turn things in just because you have made up deadlines, or do you actually secretly love watching them squirm?

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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.

1. A periodic assessment of progress that tells the student if they should be spending more time on that specific material. **Quiz grades are dynamic and can be replaced by demonstrations of future understanding.**
2. Level of mastery of the academic standards for your course. Not attendance. Not brings-a-damned-pencil-everyday. Not responsibility (If you make me type that one more time I'm going to find your school and sit in the back row of your classroom and glare unblinking for an entire day taking sporadic notes as you teach without telling you what my notes say).
3. False. Grading responsibility makes no sense. Punishment for behaviors that should be compulsory breeds a psychology where the subject will avoid certain behaviors only when the *punisher* is present. Is that the kind of responsibility you want?! The don't-kill-someone-because-I-might-go-to-jail kind?! Really?!? I have high blood pressure.
4. I hope to God not. This is the scariest implicit message we send kids. "Moving on" forces kids to compartmentalize learning and throw away things they've learned before. This is ugly, as anyone who has taught 3 weeks of review at the beginning of geometry can tell you. Let your kids go back and reassess what they had a hard time with. They will surprise you.
5. Yes. Moving on.
6. Points are a disease. Feedback is the currency of human interaction. As we've seen with the wonderful successes of capitalism, when you put a price on everything, only high priced items get valued. Is that what you want in your classroom? This is the same principle that's causing us to use the planet like a giant disposable diaper; nature has no price, but a flat screen TV does. Barf barf barf. When you use words to describe someone's performance, on the other hand, they listen. They care. They remember. How many 90/100's do you remember? How many thought-out constructive feedbacks do you remember? After the feedback, the student has a chance to get better, *then* you can grade them. It's only fair.
7. true? Don'tmakemefindyou: FALSE. Putting individual assessments in your gradebook is meaningless. Indexing those assessments by a standard is much more meaningful. This also has the side effect of showing kids what they don't know and where they should spend their time studying. Gasp!

## What's It All Mean, Basil?

The acronym is meaningless. SBG is a philosophical shift away from gate keeping. If you don't want to make that shift, then don't water down the acronym. In fact, screw the acronym altogether. I'm just going to call it good assessment from here on out. I'll keep the SBG links for you administrators, but all I'm really advocating here is for good Midwestern values to permeate your assessment philosophy.

Don't like my answers? Then I've got nothing for you. They work for me, and that's all I've got. I'm not revolutionary, hell, I'm not even that great of a teacher. It boils down to the fact that caring about your students has been around for a buhjillion years. Obscuring it with points and made-up bell curve garbage is a new smoke screen sold to us by the myth of factory style education.

Good night. I'm going to write about The Mandelbrot set now.

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14 thoughts on "The Danger of Edu-jargon: SBG's Birth Cry is its Death Knell?"

## Things That Improved My Teaching This Month « shifting phases *says:*

APRIL 22, 2011 AT 11:39 PM

[...] number of people have written about the idea that changing a grading system does not magically improve learning or teaching. That's true. But I think it's also [...]

## Reality interferes with my planning « A Best-Case Scenario *says:*

JULY 24, 2010 AT 2:28 PM

[...] I have help. One good source of backbone is in the repeated rants at ThinkThankThink. I once thought that hammering on the same anvil over and over was bad form, an indication of being [...]

## Tim Erickson *says:*

JULY 24, 2010 AT 1:19 PM

Of the many things I admire about your posts on SBG is your willingness to keep pounding the same drum. Seriously. As I get ready for the Fall (oh, THAT's why it's called the Fall...) I need to be reminded over and over to ask myself your fundamental questions.

It is easy to be so last year about assessment. Thank you thank you thank you.

## Tying it all together « Between Me and the Door *says:*

JULY 21, 2010 AT 10:31 AM

[...] and now I had stumbled into my real family – the ones who looked exactly like me. Then a few folks even started posting warnings and cautions about SBG, all the same things I was thinking as I [...]

## Brendan Murphy *says:*

JULY 21, 2010 AT 7:57 AM

I look forward to the book, but I'm pretty sure you want to learn how to spell birth correctly.

### Shawn *says:*

JULY 21, 2010 AT 8:36 AM

That's embarrassing. No spell checker in the Title field I suppose...

## Alex Rosenwald (@arosey) *says:*

JULY 19, 2010 AT 10:32 PM

This blog post pretty much puts into words the thoughts that I've been rolling over my head for the past year or so. I've been unhappy with the system of grades and grading that we've been using in my school, and doubly-unhappy by the fact that I am judged by my administrators by the grades that I assign my students. I've been talking with my

colleagues about using assessments as assessments of student understanding, but they all seem to be worried about how everything will be graded, not about what the assessments should be telling us about our students and our own instruction.

It's late, and I'm tired, so that may have not made sense, but this post is a breath of fresh air. Look forward to reading and learning more in the future!

**Shawn** says:

JULY 19, 2010 AT 11:03 PM

@Alex: I'm glad that you find the blog useful! Feel free to comment on any post no matter how old. They all get sent to me and I try to respond as much as I can.

=shawn

**Jerrid Kruse** says:

JULY 19, 2010 AT 11:26 AM

Your notion that a philosophical change must happen is right on. If we don't alter our fundamental beliefs about teaching and learning, a new strategy will just end up looking like everything else we have done. However, sometimes a new strategy can lead to philosophical wrestling.

Last year, I initiated discussions in my school about revamping our grading practices. The school had been looking at failure for quite some time and in order to help kids pass, teachers were chasing kids down to "get the work in". Getting higher percentages of students to turn in work led to higher grades, but I questioned whether the \*learning\* had increased. I thought not.

We discussed what was important and dichotomized the debate: learning vs. compliance. With this dichotomy, I was easily able to convince other teachers that learning is our goal and that focusing so much on homework completion is simply measuring students compliance.

From these discussions we (as a committee) decided to remove our focus on homework. We decided that homework designed for practice will not affect students grades. Importantly, (to avoid mutiny) teachers can still assign homework, just not use it in calculating students grades. Only assessments will be used for student grades. This could be class projects, traditional tests, or other forms of assessment (shifting assessment practices will be a future work in progress for the school). While our elimination of homework grades is not full-on SBG, it is a step away from compliance and toward learning.

To echo what you said about the acronym, had I entered these discussions with a "step by step" protocol, we would have gotten no where. Instead, I started raising some issues (as you did with the questions you ask). Then when we really got to our philosophical positions (compliance vs learning) we could create a system that worked for us, and that we thought the rest of our building would be willing to try.

Contextualized problem-solving is so important, we cannot cut and paste strategies or systems. Instead we must do the difficult work of identifying our philosophical perspective and build solutions from there. What is amazing to me, is how the discussion we had in our committee align so well with SBG, and I just found you and your blog a month or so ago. When similar philosophies go to work, it is not surprising they come up with similar responses. :)

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**Shawn** says:

JULY 19, 2010 AT 7:21 PM

@Jerrid: Thanks for the anecdote. I've been getting a lot of kick back lately from the edu-jargon haters, and I have to keep reassuring myself that SBG is the only acronym that I actually know what the letters mean. You're totally right, it's not about some magic methodology, it's just about educators sitting down a puzzling out some issues that really affect student learning, and the assessment piece is a huge one. Thanks for much for the comment, sometimes it's hard for me to know if I'm on any sort of right track when I blab into the digital wind.

=shawn

**AmberCaldwell** says:

JULY 19, 2010 AT 11:13 AM

I love this! Thanks for reposting it. I always start my spill on SBG by telling people that I came discovered SBG after having a "come to Jesus meeting with myself and my teaching." I had a 25% failure rate one semester and something had to change. SBG to the rescue! Thanks for your direction.

**Tweets that mention Think Thank Think » The Danger of Edu-jargon: SBG's Brith Cry is its Death Knell? -- Topsy.com** says:

JULY 19, 2010 AT 8:26 AM

[...] This post was mentioned on Twitter by Shervette Miller, Lisa Henry. Lisa Henry said: Man, I hope I'm NOT in the group they're talking about: <http://101studiotreet.com/wordpress/?p=947> and <http://bit.ly/aSGDBX>. [...]

**Gilbert Bernstein** says:

JULY 19, 2010 AT 2:24 AM

Hey, thanks for writing this post. It feels like a clean synopsis of what you want to transfer to other teachers at the philosophical level.

Also, I think your point about taking the time to think deeply about how YOU want to run your class is the best antidote to cookie cutter teaching. I've never seen anyone who's any good at their job who hasn't taken the time to reflect on what they're doing and why.

Although I can't think of an argument at the moment, I expect you'd be willing to respect another teacher's (for example) homework policy if they had thought deeply about it and could rebut your criticisms.

**Shawn** says:

JULY 19, 2010 AT 6:57 AM

@Gilbert: Thanks for the comment. Of course, while I don't believe in grading homework, that's only because of the way I choose to implement it, which I'm assuming is how a majority teachers do (Hence the sweeping generalization) There's no substitute for a well thought out system that works for the students. In the end

that's all that matters.

Also, I'm just hoping to make people reflect on their assessment practices; I know I didn't do that until I was forced to. Good luck out there!

=shawn

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