

## TEACHING

# Standards-Based Grading: Shifts

APRIL 5, 2010 *Shawn*

*She was angry and left, it took her months to figure out the system, and in the end she said she hated it because it was harder to get an A. She is why I must do this.*

Standards-Based Grading is nothing new. It is implemented all over the world, but not very much in the United States. It is not a flavor-of-the-month as many cynical education commenters love to say. The whole flavor-of-the-month thing rubs me the wrong way: Sometimes I'm redirected to the catacombs of the Internet, where I find myself reading someone's drivel about how myopic teachers and administrators are, and how we can't help ourselves like moths to flame. As if we're pulled into to the ice cream parlor and intoxicated by the newest fudge-brownie-mocha mixture without considering our cholesterol levels. Well, I'm lactose intolerant, and I'm sick of the cynicism.

The disrespect teachers get with regards to the changing fads of education is getting a little tiring. I agree that there are fads pushed by people looking to make money and not positive reforms, but why do we have this problem? Honestly, because we're being asked to do something impossible: Teach *every* kid, and make sure they succeed to a specific set of benchmarks. No matter what, or you're a bad teacher. It doesn't matter if they weren't read to as a toddler. It doesn't matter if they were never allowed to investigate something on their own. It doesn't even matter if the kid spends more time in front of an xbox 360 than anything else. This is public education, and that kid's a part of the public. So excuse us teachers if we're looking for a strategy that works in order to do the impossible.

Disclaimer: there's no panacea for the problem in the preceding paragraph.

This is the great American Experiment in Education, and my lab has supported one gem that certainly tips the battle my way: Standards-Based Grading. I will teach this way for the rest of my career in one way or another, not because I read an article in *Ed. Leadership* about it, but because it makes sense, and it helps my kids learn. So, here's what I've learned, and what I'm working on:

## The Message Grades Send:

**Problem:** Kids want to play games to get points in order to get an 'A'. This is a problem because it puts emphasis on accumulating points and not on what the points are supposed represent: learning. You must migrate your system of grading away from grading every single assignment summatively (that is assigning a static grade for everything a kid does), and towards grades that are indexed by content.

Students could not care less about their score on "Quiz 5" from last month; they don't even know what was on that quiz. Don't put that in your gradebook. Put the individual ideas that



## 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

that quiz assessed in your gradebook, so that the students know what it is you care about. I do this, and my gradebook has ballooned to about three times its previous size. Oh well.

## Reporting Should Be Dynamic:

Let's say you really care about a certain bit of knowledge, so much so that you're going to put in on a test. In other words, you want students to know it really badly. Like, say, the Pythagorean Theorem, and you consider your class worthless if the student hasn't learned that piece of knowledge, then your grading system should be set up to help students remediate their misunderstandings, not screw them over for not getting it the first time.<sup>1</sup>

This looks like dynamic grades. (i.e.: Grades that reflect current understandings.) A 6/10 indicates a D-level understanding. Do you really want to damn your students with that grade, or would you prefer that they take that as a hint to get moving? You already want this, but yet you make grades summative. Why?!

A kid that gets a lot of 6/10's already feels that their grades might be too low to fix — this can cause management issues. On the other hand, if you work intelligent and appropriate opportunities in for reassessment you are saying the following:

- I want you to spend time getting better
- I want to reward your effort by indicating how much you know<sup>2</sup>

Argue with that. Of course you have to work sensibility into the system, it shouldn't be possible to do nothing and wait to study for the final. If it is, perhaps you should reconsider your curriculum.

## Consistent Enforcement & Transparency:

**Major Hurdle:** Kids don't listen on the day you present the syllabus/explain expectations, so they won't understand your new grading system. You can belabor the point for the entire first day (why are you spending a whole day on the syllabus? Get going; they can read), but the students are so dead to classroom logistics that you're going to have to teach about SBG as they go along.

I have many moments throughout the semester where kids show me how trained they are by the previous system. Kids will ask me if they can do extra homework to raise their grade. Why the hockey sticks would someone ask that? It's absurd. I don't even grade homework!! I say, "No, but you can study and show me that you understand this topic from a previous chapter that you've previously demonstrated a low understanding of." They usually snap back into our reality. This is the behavior I've wanted all along, and I'm happy to say I have it now.

**Anecdote:** I once had a student at the beginning of a semester come in to "re-do a quiz," as she put it. When we talked for a second, it was clear that she had done absolutely nothing to fix her previous misconception, which had already surfaced on the quiz. I asked her why she thought she could get a better grade without knowing more, and she said, "I came in after school." I about cried; this is what she was trained to think. She made me let her try a re-do problem, and when I put one on the board she got huffy and told me that it wasn't like the one on the quiz, despite involving exactly the same mechanics. She was angry and left, it took her months to figure out the system, and in the end she said she hated it because it was harder to get an A. She is why I *must* do this. This interaction haunts me.

The end of the semester is another time that will test your SBG mettle. Kids will want to raise their grade from a B+ to and A- really badly. They want to get points any way they can, and in the old system this looked like writing another paper, or doing extra work. Which is exactly how it looks in the new system **EXCEPT**, if this new work doesn't show any growth, then little Johnny still gets a B-. I've had kids cry over this, but I have to hold my ground. Parent emails be damned; Johnny didn't improve from a 8/10 to a 9/10. He just didn't, sorry.

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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.

Kids need to be reminded that this system is about their learning, not about their points. Getting a 7/10 doesn't mean the same thing for every concept, those lost three points are a message to keep studying, not a summative deduction.

## Gradebook to LogBook:

This is something I'm working on. I want to be able to keep track of how assessments of multiple standards have fared for students over the course of an entire semester. This arose from a great conversation with my teaching neighbor, [M. Townsley](#). (I'm lucky, huh?)

We were talking about a small failing of this system: A student might put in all of the extra work to show that they've improved their understanding on several standards — They might have straight 10/10's in the gradebook — but when it comes to the final, they get a C. How is this possible? My gradebook indicates that they have total mastery! The student has demonstrated their ability, but they haven't retained all of the information for the months leading up to the final. They didn't know how to study for a large summative exam, despite having the knowledge locked somewhere in their brain. This is where a logbook of reassessments would have helped the student. Example:

If Sally can work through the chain rule perfectly the first time, she gets a 10/10. If Johnny can't, but tries and tries, and after 4 reassessments finally does a moderately difficult problem perfectly, his grade becomes a 10/10. However, Johnny sincerely needs to be reminded that it took him a lot of effort to understand the chain rule. A gradebook that offers a change log would benefit Johnny by showing him that, although he has many 10/10's, some of them took much more work to get, and therefore he may want to run through those concepts more.

I'm currently writing this program as an add-on to my current digital gradebook (PowerTeacher). I'll roll it out for all of you when it's done.

## Formative Behavior:

**Problem:** The word "formative" is buzzier than a hive of bees in July fending off a black bear on a honey run. This is a problem because it means that you'll have some seriously statistical variation in its definition. As far as I can tell, formative grading is the process of using an assessment to alter classroom practice based on the progress of the students. You probably already do this, but having a written record of your flexibility will enamor you to just about every constituent group out there.

Many argue that formative assessments should never see a gradebook. I disagree, they should be editable. I don't put every assessment into my gradebook. Sometimes the information isn't worth reporting (poorly written question, maybe), sometimes I just want to know what part of a process I need to focus on. This is formative. Sometimes I do put these grades into my gradebook, even when the average score is really low; I only do this if I want to motivate students to work on their own (i.e.: SBG), which is all the time.

- 
1. I know you're going to say something about employment and how you don't get retries. School isn't the real world, and kids aren't adults. They're learning, the goal is learning. I just don't buy the "prepare for the next level all the time" argument. It's lazy.
  2. This is most definitely not the act of just adding more grades. I know you love the idea of "responsibility" and "taking accountability" for oneself, but relax. One grade for one standard. It takes responsibility and accountability to demonstrate a new higher level of mastery.

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### Sometimes You Do This

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25 thoughts on “Standards-Based Grading: Shifts”

**Mylene DiPenta** *says:*

DECEMBER 17, 2010 AT 7:12 PM

Thanks for organizing these posts into a series — I am looking forward to trying this next semester. As for “you don’t get retries in real life”, why do people repeat something that’s almost always untrue? Think about it: if you teach something poorly today, do you wash your hands of it and never revisit it again? Or do you go back to class tomorrow and clear it up? In what job, exactly, are all mistakes unfixable? Even doctors change their treatment approach; even airline pilots correct their runway approach. Most people will never make a life or death decision on the job — and those who do can often change them! I teach electronics in what the American system calls a vocational school. We work hard to train electronics techs to troubleshoot by repeatedly testing and measuring. Every measurement that doesn’t give the answer is a failure, by that mindset. My students are so afraid of getting “the wrong answer” that they’re too traumatized to troubleshoot. It takes me two years to undo the mental poisoning (when I’m lucky enough to succeed).

**Jake** *says:*

NOVEMBER 7, 2010 AT 11:21 PM

Brilliant!

**Karen** *says:*

NOVEMBER 4, 2010 AT 9:48 PM

I do this! But I have not heard of SBG. I will be researching it now. I teach Algebra 1 in high school. The math teachers that teach courses after Algebra 1 tell me and all the kids that this type of grading is impossible for higher level math because their class is a college prep course. Doing this is a lot of work and they realize this. I believe that is the real reason they say it can’t be done. THANK YOU! I will be printing out this blog and passing it around!

**Adam** *says:*

NOVEMBER 1, 2010 AT 9:25 AM

I’ve been using: <http://progradebook.com> to handle standards- and proficiency-based grading and I find it very helpful. Its free, and the developer is happy to add your state standards to the site if you provide them.

**Grading/Being Busy** « **TeaWithBuzz** *says:*

OCTOBER 10, 2010 AT 1:09 PM

[...] thing I hate most about teaching is grading. I know some people are trying out Standards Based Grading (SBG) but I have not make that leap yet. I anticipate it will take some substantial [...]

**diane says:**

AUGUST 22, 2010 AT 3:53 PM

How do you start this type of grading? I am not a math whiz. I'd like to do it for Spanish, but don't know how to set up my grade book. We have infinite campus. Any help would be greatly appreciated.

D

D

**Sarah says:**

AUGUST 19, 2010 AT 6:36 PM

I'm glad to hear about the log book. I work with a lot of students that it takes a lot longer for them to completely understand a concept and master it (not to mention the special education kiddos that I have to document for). I would love to play with PowerTeacher!

<http://t-cubed-teaching.blogspot.com/>

**Travis A. Wittwer says:**

AUGUST 14, 2010 AT 1:14 AM

I will continue to read through your blog (bookmarked it for future reads and shared on twitter). In future readings I may come across it, but if not...Alfie Kohn is an author you should pick up if you have not already done so.

**matt greenwolfe says:**

JUNE 11, 2010 AT 6:07 PM

I am the moodle administrator for my school, and the moodle gradebook has "outcomes" which as far as I can tell are what you refer to as standards. See

<http://docs.moodle.org/en/Outcomes> .

Moodle users are very international, and this may explain why it's there, since you say it's more common in other countries. At any rate, it may be worth looking at what they have. And if you create something that is compatible with moodle, it will have a wider audience.

**Jan says:**

APRIL 12, 2010 AT 2:51 AM

I never would have believed that I could read about formative math assessments and laugh out loud! I will use the word "buzzier" in the future. I am glad you are passionate about education and willing to share your journey with the world.

**Elissa says:**

APRIL 11, 2010 AT 7:46 PM

What do you do if your school wide online grade book doesn't let you update grades from past grading periods? I want to do sbg next year but don't know how to make it work with the grade book.

**Shawn** says:

APRIL 11, 2010 AT 8:50 PM

Elissa:

Thank you for the comment. I'm sort of in this boat too. We operate on the block, so year-long courses actually only take one semester. These semesters are broken into 8 week quarters, and each quarter grade is reported on a student's transcript. This is frustrating when quarter one material matters for quarter 2. My solution is to change all of the "due dates" for the grades from quarter one after they are recorded so that they become a part of quarter 2. This may not work for your gradebook, so you may just have to copy the standards via some comma separated wizardry.

Also, if grades significantly change during quarter 2, I manually submit a form to my counseling staff to change a previous quarter's grade. The counselors don't love this, but oh well.

=shawn

**Spl** says:

APRIL 11, 2010 AT 1:20 PM

"Kids need to be reminded that this system is about their learning, not about their points." Good point. There are plenty of students and parents who will be fine with the focus on content and learning. From a parent POV this should make conferences more worthwhile.

**Chris** says:

APRIL 8, 2010 AT 11:39 PM

Your scenario of a student with 10/10's in the gradebook who gets a C on the final is the biggest hurdle for me. In my environment, variations of this scenario happen all the time. Students (appear to) learn something, (appear to) master it, but then can't do it again a week or a month later. I blame this, at least partially, on the fact that students at my school get about 5 hours of sleep per night, and research has shown how this kind of chronic sleep deprivation interferes with memory. I'm not sure how to deal with this under SBG. Perhaps mark that elusive 10/10 only when it has been repeated two or three times, a week or more apart?

**Shawn** says:

APRIL 9, 2010 AT 1:05 AM

Chris:

This is a super important point. It's really important to note that reassessment is not just "re-testing." Yes, kids can come in and redo a problem for more "points." However, the teacher also controls reassessment, and you should definitely bring back skills back and reassess them as you feel. I use a spiraling quiz system that brings back ideas from the beginning of the course so that I keep an accurate picture of their ability. I'm going to write an entire post about this issue. Thanks for the great comment!

=shawn

## Tweets that mention Think Thank Think » Standards-Based Grading: Shifts -- Topsy.com *says:*

APRIL 8, 2010 AT 12:45 PM

[...] This post was mentioned on Twitter by Liz Becker. Liz Becker said: "Standards-Based Grading: Shifts" <http://bit.ly/a4iqPQ> Thoughtful blog post. [...]

## Jason Buell *says:*

APRIL 7, 2010 AT 3:18 AM

I'm a big SBG fan too. I like how we all have slightly different approaches but the essence is still the same.

re: logbook. I set aside points throughout the year to review and reassess. I tell my kids they need to learn something the entire year. Ideally, I've narrowed my curriculum to the really important stuff. It's ALL necessary. So if they reassess downwards, that gets replaced. They usually just need a quick brushup and they'll get it again. If it's a struggle, I just figure I was wrong the first time and they never really mastered it.

## Tracie *says:*

APRIL 6, 2010 AT 8:00 PM

I had a student tell me one day, "I don't care if I learn anything, I just want the A." That was a turning point for me. That was the moment I started down the SBG road.

### Shawn *says:*

APRIL 7, 2010 AT 12:49 AM

Tracie:

I know the feeling. It's the worst thing a teacher can hear. They've been trained by the purely summative system that this attitude is OK, because they've been *rewarded* for acting that way. Ick.

=shawn

## rob mcantarffer *says:*

APRIL 6, 2010 AT 2:31 PM

Great post Shawn. I agree with you about SBG not being another "flash in the pan". It feels to me more like an evolutionary step – another step away from grades as rankings/rewards/normal curve, etc. toward grades as a way to TALK about student learning. And I love your line about the definition of formative assessment being "buzzy" :) I like and stick with Jim Popham's definitions (from Transformative Assessment) "a planned process in which teachers or students use assessment-based evidence to adjust what they're currently doing." That matches your sense of it well, I think, and it provides a "litmus test" about whether a use of assessment is formative or not: Did teachers or students USE the data to change something in order to improve learning?

### **Matt E says:**

APRIL 6, 2010 AT 2:20 PM

I second Brian's question. Plus, SBG feels as though it would eat up all of my free time during the school day, with "re-tests" and extra help requests. And how could I say no?

### **JoVE says:**

APRIL 6, 2010 AT 1:02 AM

I don't teach high school but I love what you are saying here.

I used to teach university. And in the Intro course, my main goal was to retrain kids to thinking for themselves and focusing on the learning.

I have stood in front of a roomful of kids who did well in school, came from supportive homes, were used to getting As and they were all disbelieving when I said that I'd designed the assessment so that if they learned something they got good grades and if they didn't they'd fail.

You keep going. You are definitely on to something.

### **Brian says:**

APRIL 6, 2010 AT 12:02 AM

Shawn,

How do you handle the part you call "I want you to spend time getting better"? This seems to me to be at the heart of what we do as teachers, but from many of your posts that this aspect is left in the hands of the student. Am I reading that wrong? How do you help students who earned a 6/10 reach the 7, 8, or 9 out of 10 on a particular learning target? I'm not referring to the retest, but the preparation for the retest.

### **Marc says:**

APRIL 5, 2010 AT 10:49 PM

Shawn, have you encountered any systems of grading that you would be satisfied using? Obviously the goal is to get your kids to learn, but do you think there are alternatives to SBG which still provide students with more flexible ways of demonstrating they understand the subject?

I ask because implementing SBG may not be realistic for all teachers (administrative reasons, for example). Or maybe there are systems that can meet other educational needs, examples of which escape me at the moment...

### **Riley says:**

APRIL 5, 2010 AT 7:51 PM

I'm currently working on designs for a gradebook that would address many of the concerns you bring up. I worry about PowerTeacher being too inflexible for my vision (and too expensive for individual teachers to adopt), and so I'm implementing it from a ground of GWT (Java -> JavaScript), Google's AppEngine, and a few widget libraries.

I'm a fellow math teacher in Iowa, and have extensive software development experience (for a math teacher, I guess). Next year I'm dropping at least half of my job to work on this and other projects. I'm interested in working with you, or at least hearing more about your ideas and how you're integrating with PowerTeacher – send me an email if you're interested!

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