

TEACHING

Standards-Based Grading: FAQ

MAY 18, 2010 Shawn

Look. All I'm saying is that the traditional summative-obsessed grading system is broken and often counter-productive. It teaches kids to love accumulating points instead of learning material. It teaches kids that, once the class has moved on, previous material is dead or at least dormant. These are all things that make me feel like I have grub worms infesting my skin.

I've spent some considerable wordage on this blog talking about how I do SBG, why it's necessary, and basically lauding its greatness. Disclaimer: of course SBG isn't perfect, but I don't have a utopia of self-motivated abstract thinkers. Close, but not quite.

The SBG Quick and Dirty:

If this is the only article you read on my blog, allow me to explain SBG to you as succinctly as I can. SBG is an attempt to remedy the problem created by a system that grades everything. Grading every assignment tells kids that points matter more than learning; that breeds cheating, crying for extra credit, and sometimes learning is stumbled upon. What's worse is that our grade books only reflect individual assignments and tell students absolutely nothing about the content those assignments were supposed to help teach.

Enter Standards-Based Grading:

Your grade book transforms into a laundry list of learning targets; some over-arching, some quite specific. Student work on things like quizzes, projects, and tests, which yield information about each learning target, and these assessments are fractured into a billion little pieces reported across learning targets rather than under the meaningless, "Rome Project" heading. Students can then identify their de/proficiencies and design remediation techniques targeted specifically at the standards they don't know. As a teacher, you replace their previous grades with their more recent demonstrations, whether these are improvements or backslides. To be clear, a quiz or a project may affect the same grade. This gives an accurate and timely report to all interested parties about the current level of understanding of the student, and forces the student to care about learning over points. Yay! Oh, and Stop. Grading. Homework. **Please.**

Frequently Asked Questions:

I've received some great questions about SBG, and I wanted to organize those into one FAQ sheet. Actually, they won't all be questions, some are just misconceptions that I'd like to address:

SBG is too easy and makes students soft.

At the onset, I worried about this, too. However my experience has shown that the contrary is true. SBG is often much more difficult for students, because they realize that they are not allowed to binge and purge knowledge. Reassessment becomes a part of the classroom



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.

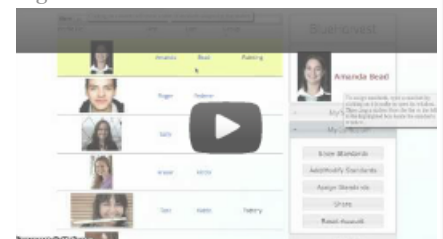
Yes, I want to be a part of your next project: shawn dot thinkthankthink at gmail dot com

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

culture, and they must connect old knowledge to new knowledge in order to assess well and actually learn. Does that sound easy to you?

This forces students to learn about themselves as a learner (I just typed that, my pancreas hurts). They have to analyze their own study habits to figure out what actually works for them, and it helps them retain knowledge. This is the academic equivalent of an ab workout run by Jillian Michaels followed by the Spartan 300 training regimen. No, Sir, not soft, these students are hard as rocks.

What Happens When I have a Room Full of 1,000 Students wanting to reassess?

This is one of the biggest fears for teachers looking to implement SBG. I had it. My experience has been that students do not leap at the opportunity to fix their grades like you imagine they will (surprise!). They trickle in a bit heavier as the end of the semester approaches, which can become tiresome. Here are my methods for dealing with student-initiated reassessments:

1. One attempt per student per day.
2. An attempt is a testing situation and must be taken seriously under penalty of ejection.
3. Student must know exactly what standard they want to attempt and how they want to reassess it

Those have served me well this year. The first rule prevents end-of-the-term rushes. The second is obvious, and the third requires them to have actually studied. I have rule 3 because students were coming in and saying things like, “Cornally, which quiz is my lowest, I’ll do that.” Then they’d just hope they could do better. This was not what I wanted. When a kid says that now, I say, “Get out, study, and figure out what you need to do, I am not your grade’s babysitter.” And then I do a **Mortal Kombat fatality** to them. Ok, that’s not true, I’ve never fought a student to the death. Not even once!

SBG Does Not Prepare Students For College.

This one is the most acidic. It burns me a bit, and there’s a lot more to the college preparation monster than the SBG aspect. First of all, remember that secondary education is completely different from college and from the working world, too. What we think we are doing to “prepare” them for college is mostly smoke and mirrors anyway. Grading your prescribed organization of notebooks is silly (how many of those were organized during the waning moments before the bell? Most.) Trying to teach responsibility in general is silly, however making it necessary for your class is much more effective.

The argument is that a system which allows for reassessment does not reflect the hard-nosed sparse assesment environment that is college. True, but those grind-stone midterms and finals are also present in any good SBG-loving course. The SBG helps the students to prepare for these exams in ways that are almost unbelievable. They have to learn, retain, and understand how they do those things. That’s college readiness.

Want to prepare them for college? Stop grading notebooks and homework, and start using genuine assessments that require kids to actually know stuff. *Drops mic*

What is reassessment and why is it necessary?

Reassessment is just that. It is not retesting. It is the act of taking a multiple pictures of a student’s understanding to get an actual image of what they know. This is a light-year step forward from taking one summative quiz, one test, and then forgetting all about it until the final (if it even comes back then).

Reassessment can either be student-initiated or teacher-initiated. That is: a student assesses poorly; decides to study the material again; and then comes in to do another problem, or teach you, or writes something new that you can reassess. On the other side of

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the coin are reassessments that the teacher initiates. When you give a quiz you can bring back old concepts that you want to get better pictures of. These can be bell ringers, quiz questions, interviews, projects that cover many topics, or whatever. All of these go into the same grade book and change the student's grade based on their current understanding.

But you don't get second chances in "real" life, let alone infinite chances, you liberal dolt!

This is a paradigm that you have to excise. I may be a liberal dolt, but you most certainly do get second chances in real life. For sure, some things are a one-shot, but don't sell your kids short. They can tell the difference. All you're doing by being a hard ass is making them hate you and learning. If we truly believe that all kids learn differently, then we must admit that their rates of knowledge acquisition will also be different. Why is Chapter 5's materials now completely off limits? Simply because you have a schedule and are now in Chapter 6? Ridiculous. Perhaps you should get a different job:



How do I come up with reassessments?

This is the hard part. You've recognized that being a gate(bridge)keeper is silly, and that school should be about learning, not points accumulation. This invariably comes down to you making up problems on the spot for little Johnny who wants to reassess. Or does it? This depends on the course you teach. I've written a lot about this already. In math it's sometimes easy to come up with new problems that assess the same standard. In history, this method is not nearly the best choice for reassessing.

In more qualitative subjects, it is almost always better to center on the student attempting to teach you something: A quiz showed they don't know anything about the bicameral system? Then it's incumbent upon them to come in and teach you why we have one. There's no test generation at all on your part.

Needless to say, your style should and will vary based on what you're teaching.

Credit to our district's fearless leader @mctownsley for guidance in developing this post.

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I'm Giving Away iPhones!

Guest Post: A Student (Freshman)

Comments are disabled.

33 thoughts on "Standards-Based Grading: FAQ"

Skill Objectives « The Virtual Image *says:*

JUNE 27, 2011 AT 10:14 AM

[...] So I need to teach it differently, and I think I also need to grade it specifically, as in Standards-Based Grading [...]

Ups and Downs of the 2-Copy Quiz « shifting phases *says:*

APRIL 8, 2011 AT 11:04 PM

[...] is the #1 complaint). It's said best by Shawn Cornally from from Think Thank Think: "I am not your grade's babysitter." In fact I sometimes wondered if I should stop using the online gradebook altogether. [...]

@djainslie *says:*

NOVEMBER 21, 2010 AT 1:59 PM

Sorry to be jumping in on this discussion late... as a district we are working on rolling out SBG with our K-5 teachers. Like some said it is the 'on the ground' issue that I'm trying to be able to help them with. So I'd love to see a screen capture of someone's grade book. If I help the teachers create a grade book with competencies (skills created by grade level groups in each subject), and scoring guides to assist with what a 4-3-2-1 looks like in each competency how would they then take an assessment and record it under the competencies? Recorded as the numerical rubric (4-3-2-1), then wouldn't there be alot of those in one column? Am I making more of this then necessary? Thanks for any assistance you can offer.

SBG Express: Details « Sustainably Digital *says:*

AUGUST 30, 2010 AT 8:19 AM

[...] 1 standard per day, per student (the Cornally Corollary) [...]

Late on the reblog, but better late than... « Research in Practice *says:*

JUNE 4, 2010 AT 7:40 PM

[...] people having. He is leaving the full-time, full-pay job to hew an entrepreneurial path (designing SBG-supportive software). I did something like this as well. Like Riley, I'm not naturally [...]

SBG: My first step « GL(s,R) *says:*

MAY 22, 2010 AT 11:26 PM

[...] Based Grading This fall, I get to teach Finite Mathematics and Precalculus. While I plan on using Standard Based Grading for both, my focus so far has been on the former. A little background on the course is probably [...]

Tracie *says:*

MAY 20, 2010 AT 6:40 AM

Sean and Sue and everyone on the fence, just do it. I started this with two of my classes at the beginning of this trimester. I told my kids we were going to experiment with a new grading system (they took that amazingly well) and that we were going to learn as we go. I have been known to try weird new things before, so they really didn't even blink.

Especially the first time around, it is important to be honest with them and let them know exactly where they are and exactly where you are. I did a lot of rearranging and rewriting of my standards in real time, so my grade book looks a little funky. My Astronomy class was the hardest. For one section, I started out with six targets and as we moved through the material and quizzes, I realized two of my targets didn't make much sense and could be combined with another one. So in my grade book, there is no "Target 3" or "Target 6". As long as I let the kids in on this little mystery, they were okay with it.

Jason Buell *says*:

MAY 19, 2010 AT 3:07 PM

Found it. She mentions it but doesn't give the code.

<http://axiomstoteachby.blogspot.com/2009/08/my-assessment-plan.html>

Jason Buell *says*:

MAY 19, 2010 AT 1:56 PM

I just remembered this but I think someone....Allison Blank maybe, created a LaTeX script that would generate questions.

Sue VanHattum *says*:

MAY 19, 2010 AT 1:47 PM

Karl, I like your list. I noticed solving proportions and percents in with solving linear equations. My book puts proportions with rational expressions, and I like having them see it earlier. I hadn't thought of that. It's such a solid, down-to-earth real-world problems topic – why should we wait so long to use it?

Here's what I've got so far. I used to give 4 tests and a final. Most of what I plan to do will be 3 to 5 questions, so I'm calling those mini-tests. I've bundled together skills into what someone around here called topics, and two of those (graphing and factoring) were big enough for one of my old-fashioned tests. For reassessing, I'll have to make something a bit shorter. I think I'm ok with figuring that out as I go.

I'm still giving a comprehensive final (by choice), but I might give it twice, since they won't have practiced that sort of thing, and may need to build stamina for it. I want them to show me that their 'mastery' has lasted more than a few days.

Kate Nowak *says*:

MAY 19, 2010 AT 1:17 PM

Here's my [geometry list](#) if it helps.

I'd really like to get all my questions in ExamView with dynamic values so I can print out brand new ones on the fly. Right now all my quizzes are just in lame old static Word documents. For re-takes I make them up on the spot.

Jason Buell says:

MAY 19, 2010 AT 11:35 AM

Second link didn't work. [Try again](#). If that doesn't work, just go to the very next post from the first link, it's called In Defense of Skills Sheets

Jason Buell says:

MAY 19, 2010 AT 11:34 AM

@Sean and Sue I have a vertically aligned math topic sheet in a Word document. It's only K-8 though. I don't think I'm allowed to post it online b/c I didn't create it, it comes from a book. However, if you wanted to DM me or or send me an email I can forward it over.

@CalcDave – I advocate topics scores instead of skill lists for exactly that reason. Skill lists would be a part of it, but a lower level part of a topic score. The higher levels of a topic score would include the things you mentioned. Some thoughts on that [here](#) and [here](#).

David Cox says:

MAY 19, 2010 AT 10:33 AM

Sean [Here you go!](#) This is my current skill list for algebra 1 with sample questions that we use as "study guides." If you're using ExamView (or have access to it), I'll be glad to send you my question banks so you can modify as you see fit.

@All of the above

I'm a huge fan of SBG and all of my department is on board (most of them jumped on the train about 3 days before school started this year), so I know it can be done. Nothing is perfect the first time you try it, but sometimes you just have to throw stuff against the wall and see what sticks.

The two major weaknesses I see with SBG are in diagnosing and prescribing what a student must do between assessments and making the reassessments "optional" by having them done outside of class. I'm not sure that a system will gain mass approval if it requires too much out of class time for teacher and/or student. I have the luxury of 94 minutes per day/5 days per week/2 semesters per year, but in order for other teachers in my district to jump on board, we are going to have to find a way for this to work "in class."

Question is: How?

Matt Townsley says:

MAY 19, 2010 AT 10:03 AM

@calcdave – Great modifications! You're making changes that still fit within the framework of sbg: reporting students' areas of strengths and weaknesses based on assessments specifically created to measure the essential learnings. Welcome to the SBG clan! :)

calcdave says:

MAY 19, 2010 AT 9:59 AM

Sam (and others): If/when I get around to doing this (I feel the same as Sweens here...) here are some of the modifications I've thought through: One of the "standards" (or "skills") I'd have on my gradesheets would be called "Minor mistakes." They could be marked down in that area for things like leaving off a negative, adding incorrectly, etc. Things that were covered in previous courses, but are easy to still mess up on. Then, when the student gets their paper back, they can see that they really do understand quadratic formula, but they would've got it wrong because they did order of operations incorrectly (or whatever).

I'd also like to have a "standard" called something like "Synthesis." Where multiple standards are in the same problem to assess if they know how to put them together. This one may be harder to do, but I think SBG seems to lose something when only testing one standard at a time and I'd like to have a quiz of integrals where they don't know to use substitution or integration by parts or whatever. Something where the decision making to figure out which method to use is assessed.

Karl Fisch *says*:

MAY 19, 2010 AT 9:36 AM

Sean and Sue – Let me preface this with I'm just beginning to go down this road and I'm nowhere near the level of thinking that Shawn and Matt and Jason and Dan and Kate and [fill in your favorite sbg blogger here]. . . are at, and therefore my thinking may not be that good yet, still has lots of holes, and isn't truly sbg yet.

Having said that, here's my [fledgling concept/skills list](#) for Algebra I. If you go to my [transparent algebra](#) tag, you'll see some related thinking. Once we get to the fall, I'll be posting my initial skills assessments on the class blog, so those will be available (but, again, may not be that good just yet).

I'm hoping that as I get into it next fall, lots of folks will drop by and critique so that – eventually – my stuff will approach the level of quality of many of the folks above.

Brian *says*:

MAY 19, 2010 AT 9:31 AM

Shawn, you kill me with these posts. My wife looks at me strangely for laughing aloud while reading.

I'm ready to try SBG for my AP Physics class next year. I'm still undecided on my Honors Physics classes, but that is purely a numbers issue. I'm forwarding this post to my administrators so that they'll understand why I want to publish my grades electronically. Thanks.

Sue VanHattum *says*:

MAY 19, 2010 AT 9:05 AM

>So, are people posting their standards and questions online anywhere? If I had a list of standards I could adapt and a companion list of questions to start me off, I would be out of excuses.

I don't even need the questions, just the list of standards. I'm teaching beginning algebra at a community college. That's pretty much the same as high school algebra I. I'm also teaching CalcII. If you have a list of standards for either of those, it would really help me.

monika hardy *says:*

MAY 19, 2010 AT 7:59 AM

A quiz showed they don't know anything about the bicameral system? Then it's incumbent upon them to come in and teach you why we have one.

absolutely love the idea that proof of fixing holes is when they can teach it. i like that for the first time around as well. perhaps assessment is as simple as – have they taught it to others..

seems to be more real life – and so... more life long..

i like this blog.

Sean Sweeney *says:*

MAY 19, 2010 AT 7:58 AM

I'm a hold out. I was really excited about trying to start SBG with my alg1 class this year, but I just didn't get it together in time. There's no way I'm going to have the time to get it together for next year either. I know teachers say that a lot and sometimes its a matter of wanting to make time, but seriously I won't have time this summer. I have a small classroom and have my own ways of getting some of the same benefits SBG gives. So, are people posting their standards and questions online anywhere? If I had a list of standards I could adapt and a companion list of questions to start me off, I would be out of excuses.

Jan *says:*

MAY 19, 2010 AT 5:44 AM

You totally have me on board with SBG now, but more important than that, you have inspired me to watch Monte Python again. I hope all you serious educators out there took the time for that.

Jason Buell *says:*

MAY 18, 2010 AT 11:10 PM

@samjshah.

How I do it, but Shawn's or Matt's methods might vary.

1. I write mine by hand and yeah, I just write a ton of easy/med/hard questions while I'm setting my standards. Dave uses ExamView.
 2. This is one of the many ways electronic gradebooks usually suck. I keep it in excel before transferring over to powerschool. Usually I'll leave a score with a comment like "Still needs stdrd 3b" or "Make sure she understands how to calculate density" or "Only retest on F=ma" I use stickies too. I don't know a better way to handle it but I'm hoping Riley Lark can come up with something awesome.
 3. I reassess fairly frequently. I'm in middle school so I don't have finals. Usually I use the first week back from vacations and the last week before progress reports to do that kind of stuff. There topics carry over to the new trimester so first trimester there's 4, second there's 9.
 4. I use conjunctive scoring so I don't end up averaging them. I also think that's one of the weaknesses of skills lists vs. topic scores.
- Hope this helps. Tweet me if you need clarification or just comment again.

Jason Buell says:

MAY 18, 2010 AT 10:56 PM

Seriously, it's like everyone I follow on twitter in this comment thread. Perhaps I'm siloing myself.

Misconception alert: Assessing a standard with a quiz, a final, a midterm (in science, a lab) are not separate entities in SBG. They're all different methods of getting at the same thing. So it doesn't really make sense to say SBG is one part of the grade, the final is another, labs are another. Another way of saying that is that unless the method is explicitly outlined in the standard, it's irrelevant. Writing standards, you gotta write. Most things are up for grabs.

@Sue – I used to think only 100% SBG or you're just faking it. Now I think the reality that most teachers don't have that kind of leeway with admin has softened my stance. So a hybrid is better than nothing. I'd consider the skills list system (like Dan Meyer) a hybrid system. Somewhere, there has to be a grade (a significant part of the grade) that is purely a measure of academic progress towards mastery. That's the thing that should be the focus. If you have to put in other categories, go for it, but don't let that pure section get polluted (in Matt's parlance)

@Kate – I LOVE convos like that. I also agree with the "not test the same day as tutorial" policy. I'm also completely comfortable with telling a kid to try again in a couple days even if they passed. Sometimes, I just want to be sure they didn't just cram it in there.

Shawn says:

MAY 19, 2010 AT 6:48 AM

@Jason Buell: This is the kind of west coast thinking i love. I'm going to add that to the list of FAQs for sure.

Sam Shah says:

MAY 18, 2010 AT 10:23 PM

Trying to get a handle on SBG on the ground. No matter all the posts I read from you and others, I have major trouble seeing it actually put together on the ground. I literally can't figure out how it works, ground up. Apologies if you've answered these before — chance are you have.

1. Do you have an electronic file with multiple questions (EASY/MEDIUM/HARD) for each skill, for when kids want to retest?
2. What if you are testing one skill (e.g. 1D quadratic inequalities, like $x^2 - 5x < 16$) and students make an algebraic error solving the quadratic formula (a skill from before)? What if they transposed two numbers, or misread a 5 as a 3? What do you put in your gradebook for those situations?
3. Do kids only have to do a skill once correctly to forever have full marks on the books? Or do they — aside from their midterm/final — have to prove this skill to you again?
4. Since you have your gradebook with all these different skills in it, and each skill is worth the same number of points, does that screw things up? Like some topics get overly weighted while others get the short shrift?

Those are some of the questions I've had for you. I just am too tired at the moment to

remember the rest.

I'm intrigued enough that I am contemplating making some hybrid between SBG and what I do now – which is pretty traditional. There are reasons of my own, but also a lot of cultural/institutional reasons why adopting SBG wholesale would be a disaster at my school.

Sam

Shawn *says:*

MAY 19, 2010 AT 6:47 AM

OMG k8nowak commented on my blog! Those are fantastic solutions. This is why we blog. Love It!

@Sam Shah: 1. No, I don't. I usually make them up on the spot, or make the kids make them up, or steal from the book.

2. That's your professional decision. Do they understand the topic at hand, but their grade for another standard should be edited due to a lingering misconception? This point is one of the main reasons for going SBG. You can separate understandings rather than destroy information.

3. They prove it to me whenever it gets used, anything can be an assessment if I think it's valid.

4. Usually larger topics end up having more standards. Like graphing analytically vs. knowing the power rule. Graphing Analytically just has more to it and therefore needs to be separated into more standards and therefore gets more weight, therefore such as therefore.... sorry

I'm pumped you want to get on the train. I think you'll find that the one-footed approach will quickly lead to all hands on deck SBG zealotry.

Kate Nowak *says:*

MAY 18, 2010 AT 9:33 PM

I think I have the "swamped with kiddos" and "hoping they'll get lucky by guessing" problems sorted. At some point this year I started saying they could either get help from me or they could re-take, but not both on the same day. (That I was happy to help them, but they'd have to come back another time to re-take) – It's been like the final piece that was missing from this setup for me.

Today a teacher came to see me after his Learning Support Center duty saying "Janel came in and told me she needed to practice 'Proving Sides are in Proportion' and 'Writing the Equation of a Perpendicular Bisector of a Given Segment' and could I answer some questions about old examples and give her a few practice problems and check them for her – HOW DID YOU DO THAT?!" It was kind of awesome.

Sue VanHattum *says:*

MAY 18, 2010 AT 4:06 PM

What's your opinion of using SBG for 40% of the grade, and homework, projects, and

final for the rest? (I teach community college.)

Jason Buell *says:*

MAY 18, 2010 AT 4:04 PM

@calcdave If you're assessing performance against a standard, the level should be the same. Otherwise it's not standards-based.

Re:Handling reassessments. I've instituted a rule that they can reassess pretty much whenever (basically following the same methods as Shawn) all the way up to some cut point. The cut point is usually whenever its time to move on to a new topic. After that, students have a two-column paper. On the left is what standards they wish to improve. On the right includes steps they've taken to remediate. They sometimes create those steps themselves but usually they just want (yes, I said WANT) homework. I'll assign some problems or have a list pre-made and when they do it, then they can reassess.

Other common options are after school tutorial sessions (pre-scheduled). Tutorials from friends (they need to write a summary and the friend needs to be at least one level higher and sign off), internet help (summary and URLs).

The problem isn't so much them wanting to reassess, it's hoping they'll get lucky and guess at what I throw at them. I want them to come prepared.

In science it's a little easier to reassess I think because it's one concept but you can approach it in multiple angles.

Thanks for the SBG love.

calcdave *says:*

MAY 18, 2010 AT 1:27 PM

Do you make reassessments harder than original? On average, how many reassessments does each kid take?

Shawn *says:*

MAY 18, 2010 AT 3:38 PM

@calcdave: Usually. I just want to make sure the reassessment gets me an accurate picture of the specific standard I'm looking at. Sometimes the algebra is way out of control, but I can see whether the calculus technique is there or not.

=shawn

Matt Townsley *says:*

MAY 18, 2010 AT 1:25 PM

Reassessment – I think a different (better?) model for addressing “a room full of 1000 students” might be to purposefully loop standards on assessments. Let's say assessments happen every Friday and typically cover 5 standards. Re-teach/review the two lowest standards the following week, add those two to the next week's assessments to “build in” the reassessment rather than requiring students to come in outside of class. This creates a little more planning up front on the teachers' end, but also more purely incorporates the formative assessment model/idea.

I could see this working in spelling or vocabulary. Continue to assess the most difficult words until the majority of the kids "get it." Purposeful re-assessments could be individualized too, of course.

Does any of this make sense?

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