

BYRAM HILLS CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
ARMONK, NEW YORK

Author: Mike Chunev
Title of Project: *Standards Based Grading in the Art Classroom*
Year: 2014 - 2015
School/Grade: Byram Hills High School, Grade 9 - 12

SUMMARY OF *INVESTIGATORS OF PRACTICE* ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

Context:

In my high school art classroom, I am always looking for an approach where my students take ownership of their learning, value my teacher feedback, and earn a good grade as a natural result of the process.

However, grades can include various elements, such as timeliness of assignments, discrete skills, or effort. Thus, what does the grade really mean? Students earn grades based on a standard, filtered through a rubric, resulting in a summed number or a letter grade. As an art teacher, I am able to assess measurable skills and techniques, but some of my students focus more on the grade and less on the experience. Too often, my students will look at a rubric not as a self-assessment tool, but as a checklist. Their work may be technically proficient and meet the maximum standards outlined, but the rubric does not create the personal connection of ownership. Quality also matters, and the ability to measure the quality of one's own work is a learned skill.

Grading is the practice by which I can measure student learning through classroom technical assignments and projects. Often, my students and I will engage in reflective “formative” discussions about their work. There, I can assess their progress, question them for their level of understanding, and discuss possible solutions to current challenges. The art classroom can be a very open and engaging environment for students, and I prefer not to focus on dialog that discusses grades. I think that some of my art students miss how a given lesson / goal fits into understanding the broader art contexts or how clever nuances give meaning to their works. Those students fear risk, because the same failure that brings insight and understanding is also associated with poor grades. Many of my art colleagues successfully use grading rubrics to assess work that has been completed. Although they can obtain valid and measurable assessments of structure and proper procedure, they are a terminal experience based on points. They do not provide students important feedback about the artistic process and any personal and long-lasting aesthetic values art students might discover.

Another colleague suggested that I examine Standards Based Grading as a strategy that would complement the formative assessment approach that I successfully employ. Standards Based Grading (SBG) provides a much more connected approach were I would be able to give more meaningful feedback to my students based on specific learning. For this year, I decided to examine my current Film I curriculum. I would review each lesson and project and consider what was most valuable as a learning goal. Students would clearly know what skills and concepts were important for them to learn. Together we could examine their progress. Through

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homework, project work, or discussion, I can better track what material they master and can clearly articulate what content or skill needs more attention. I would also ask my students what they thought was valuable in the art curriculum to see whether my material is relevant and authentic.

Action Plan:

For *Investigators of Practice*, I examined a strategy that could best complement the formative assessment approaches I currently use in my art classes. Standards Based Grading (SBG) provides a much more connected approach where I would be able to provide more meaningful feedback to my students based on specific learning goals. For this year, I decided to examine how SBG could best measure students' understanding of content in the current Film I curriculum.

My research questions became: How can I provide more meaningful feedback to my Film I students about how well they understand specific skills and concepts within stated learning goals.

Results:

Identifying clear learning goals

SBG helps focus on the learning goals outlined in our curriculum. It focuses on the content, skills, concepts and standards that students need to know. As an art teacher, my students can concern themselves with improving their art rather than agonizing about a scored number. The level of mastery the student achieves is based on his or her understandings of the skills and concepts identified within the project.

With that slight change in approach, it becomes easier to see just how well my students perform in the classroom as a whole and individually. The SBG approach helps teachers identify areas where their students need clarification or additional instruction with particular skills or concepts. When the learning goals are clearly presented, students better understand and internalize the information presented in the coursework.

Linking assessments to the learning goals

SBG encourages me to take a closer look at my curriculum and make sure that each skill, related concepts and activity has a purpose. With a clearer idea of each learning goal I can be much more deliberate about what I need to teach students within any given project. Charlotte Danielson says that we must be clear on our goals for students:

“[S]tudents learn through active intellectual engagement with content. While there are patterns in cognitive, social, and emotional developmental stages typical of different age groups, students learn in their individual ways and may have gaps or misconceptions that the teacher needs to uncover in order to plan appropriate learning activities...”

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In order to be clear, I began examining what is non-valuable or redundant in the Film I curriculum. I believe that film is an art that incorporates many of the other arts (visual, photographic, theatrical, musical, and literary). Although much of the content has value, I had to consider what content best supports my learning goals. I realized that, while much of the art history regarding the evolution of film is interesting, it doesn't directly serve what is valuable and measurable to the curriculum goals and outcomes. The curriculum relates better to measurable skills and concepts

Providing good feedback for students to achieve those learning goals

It was also suggested to me that I should be gathering feedback from my students at the same time. In this way, I could get an indication of how they were experiencing my course—what is working and what is not working for them—and in what ways I could improve the learning experience. I created a survey with a variety of open-ended questions that asked my students to think about what they found valuable in my art classroom and what types of learning modes they connected to most.

Overall, it was interesting what my students thought of their learning. Some answers were fairly predictable: when asked “What is your preferred way of being graded?” not surprisingly, the answers were pretty evenly mixed between multiple choice tests and projects. I also asked my students, “What do grades mean to you?” Six out of 28 responses believed grades were important because they are the most important determining factor when applying to colleges. However, 19 students thought that grades were an indication of just how much they understood the content. Additionally, 3 students believed that college acceptance was the most important factor, but understanding and knowledge was just as important.

I was encouraged to see that my students valued knowledge and knowing as much as I do. Once I identify clearly what learning my students need, I can then let them know how well I think that they are mastering those particular skills and concepts.

As an art teacher, I very much appreciate assessment that is more than a number grade. I can identify specifically what my students understand and how well they understand any of the content important to the class. I can target specific areas of content that I think my students have mastered and offer suggestions where they might improve. More importantly, the focus is on *mastery of skills* rather than *points*, and I think that it is much easier to differentiate instruction. Standards based grading is an assessment and response approach that can help me to stay focused on the goals of the class, include all parts of the curriculum within every project, and give students specific feedback about their strengths and challenges.

My Approach

The goal of using of standards-based grading in my classroom is to reflect what students really know and how well they apply needed skills and concepts to their artwork. Traditionally, I have assigned several grades for one project and separated them by what skills, techniques and concepts are to be learned and measured. I began by examining my first Film I lesson: Making a movie without a Camera. Students learn the skills of editing, the basic use of desktop tools, how to use online sound-effects, how to use online music, desktop organization, title cards, use of transitions, applying bars, tone & black video, outputting and uploading final projects.

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Students also learn the concepts and rationale that illuminates what is good presentation, good execution, and a demonstrated sense of connection to a story.

I continued to examine and note every learned skill and concept for every lesson introduced throughout the semester. When I was done, I had all the content of my course broken up by lesson and represented in list form. Finally, I was able to frame my standards in a tool that can best communicate what my students know - and how well they know it - for each lesson.

Creating a Performance Scale

Standards-based grading performance scale scores are not comparable to the conventional A, B, C, D, grading scale.

In Standards-Based Grading, performance is assigned a number:

5. The student met the standard, but has also taken skills and concepts and moved them with greater complexity and with greater sophistication.
4. Demonstrates that the student has consistently met the standard, with proficiency.
3. The student has met the standard, however, requires some prompts and coaching.
2. Demonstrates that the student has made little progress toward the standard.
1. The student has made no progress or has not addressed the work or the standard.

Traditional letter grades report the number of points earned in a project and reflect little to the student of what he or she needs to work on or has mastered. With SBG, each project rubric contains the corresponding list of identified technical and conceptual goals. With the project goals clearly articulated, the 1-5 rating clearly expresses to students (and parents) where their strengths and weakness are. I use this same formative approach with my other classes. Students know what to expect every time. This was designed for my Film I class, but could easily be adapted to other areas of my curriculum by identifying key fundamental goals and to indicate the appropriate depth of knowledge or skill level.

Implications:

Overall, I liked “investigating” using this particular approach because I was much more focused on modes and value of improvement rather than a grade. My initial goals were attained:

1. I identified an approach that will provide valuable feedback to my students that is based on identifiable and useful learning goals.
2. Standards Based Grading (SBG) is a strategy that could complement well the formative assessment approaches I currently use in my art classes.

As I move forward in my research, it's important that I address the most effective ways of introducing this process to my Film I students and provide an efficient system where we can discuss successes and challenges.

- I need to express clearly to my students and parents the rationale for Standards Based Grading and how my students can best use the information to affirm mastery of those skills

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and concepts that need attention. Recently, I created a *Smartboard* presentation that highlights the SBG during the review of the syllabus at the beginning of the semester.

- The purpose of Standards Based Grading is to raise student achievement by clearly communicating student achievement with data that reflect the levels of success in student process and products. I will create those formal and informal opportunities necessary to engage students in the SBG process. I foresee students using rubrics throughout the process in formal and informal venues. Moreover, I need to understand how best to translate and record Standards Based Grades into our current electronic grading system.
- Most importantly, I need to bring my administrators and colleagues on board both for clarity and as collaborators. It's important to me that I share my research and included everyone in the conversation. I think sharing my experiences with my other art teachers will open the door to professional discussions that will include best practices and norms of formative assessment information.

All in all, it's important to me as an art instructor that I develop and apply assessments which best reflect my students' understanding, give useful feedback, and provide information to improve the curriculum. I believe Standards Based Grading provides the most thoughtful and practical approach for my Film I classes.

Resources:

O'Connor, Ken. *How to Grade for Learning: Linking Grades to Standards*. Arlington Heights, IL: SkyLight Professional Development, 2002. Print.

"Resources." *Teachscape*. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 June 2015.

"Standards-Based Grading (SBG) FAQ." *Standards-Based Grading (SBG) FAQ*. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 June 2015.

"Tips From Dr. Marzano." *Marzano Research*. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 June 2015.

"Using Student Feedback." *Teaching Resources -*. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 June 2015.