

BYRAM HILLS CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
ARMONK, NEW YORK

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Title of Project: *Creating and implementing a standards based grading current events elective*
Year: 2015-2016
School/Grade: 9th to 11th, Byram Hills High School

SUMMARY OF *INVESTIGATORS OF PRACTICE* ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

Context:

This year, I was given the opportunity to teach a one semester elective course called “Understanding the 21st Century World” in the high school social studies department. Our department wanted to create an elective course about current events that would be for sophomores and freshmen. Since the course was for freshmen and sophomores I felt strongly that the course should also focus on the development of media literacy skills in addition to current events, because they would need those skills throughout high school and life. Once I settled on the development of skills as a focus of the course, I began to think about standards based grading as an appropriate way to assess the students. There is great complementarity between skill development and standards based grading and mastery learning. Given my past research about quality feedback and resilience, it was a natural progression for me to implement standards based grading in this course.

Action Plan:

My research focus this year was to create and implement an effective standards based grading course in order to help my students develop their literacy skills. I believe that electives should support the work done in the other classes and spark interests and love of learning. I hoped that my course that would allow students to focus on skill development without worrying constantly about their grades, and that this would allow them to work towards mastery and ultimately achieve greater growth in the important media literacy skills.

I began my research by reading the issue of Educational Leadership from December 2013/January 2014 called “*Getting Students to Mastery*”. Inside were a number of different articles about the benefits of helping students see learning as a continuum rather than a moment in time. I also read parts of the book “*How to Grade for Learning*” by Ken O’Connor over the summer before I designed the course. It didn’t take a lot of convincing for me to use standards based grading after reading these two sources. I learned that standards based grading is a system where the traditional grades such as A and B, or 88 and 92 are replaced by scores specific to learning goals and performance standards. For example, in my class, they never take a test on a topic. Rather, a debate about gun control might measure their ability to make strategic use of digital media in

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presentations to enhance understandings, their ability to speak clearly in a manner that is understandable and appropriate to a given audience, and to write and speak with a clear plan of organization, including topic sentences, transition phrases, introductions and conclusions. When they read an article, I would assess their media literacy skills such as their ability to articulate the central idea of an article and provide an accurate summary, find and evaluate the point of view of the article, identify bias and its impact on the article, analyze the extent to which the author has supported their claim, and assess the reliability of the source. For each of those discreet skills, a score would be reported based on a rubric that describes levels of mastery. Students will be assessed multiple times in each skill and final grades would be determined based on level of mastery at the end of the quarter rather than an average of scores from assessments measuring understanding at one moment in time.

Later in the school year I also read “*Grading Smarter Not Harder*” by Myron Dueck and gained more affirmation for what I was doing, particularly the focus on the grade being a reflection of only mastery of course content and not a reflection of behaviors such as turning in work late. Unfortunately, the standards based grading system did not work for all students and after encountering students that remained unmotivated learners despite standards based grading, I read “*Motivation in the Classroom*” by Cheryl Spaulding. The biggest take away from this book was the reminder that motivation increases when students feel competent and in control. These two variables are important to consider and when I changed some things for the second semester, I made efforts to increase student choice in what topics we covered so that they would feel more in control. Surveys were used to allow students to articulate what topics they wanted to cover and within each topic, students were asked what questions they had about those topics on the first day of learning and their questions guided my lesson planning.

I truly had the ideal research setting in which to do my action research. I had an elective course so our pace was flexible, and the class was small so the feedback I could give could be more extensive than in a full class of 25 students. I could try out ideas, discuss them with the students to get their feedback, and try out new ideas. I gathered data constantly through conversations with the entire class, surveys given via google classroom, and conversations with other teachers. I even had the benefit of a second semester to give me a fresh start with a new group to fix mistakes and change practices halfway through the year.

Results:

My students did not all love standards based grading. Some thought the class was too hard, and they felt that without percentages, they weren’t completely clear on exactly how they were doing in the course at any given moment. I thought that since they knew what skills they needed to work on they would feel clear on how they were doing. What I didn’t expect is that some students would want to know exactly what their average was at any given moment during the semester. One especially insightful comment was that they didn’t have enough time to improve upon skills. This

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helped me to see that next year I need to reduce the number of skills I am trying to develop. I definitely feel that for a one semester class, I was trying to do too much. Below are some of the comments that were stated by students in both semesters.

- *I did feel that the feedback was very helpful, but in general I am not a fan of standard based grading because it is hard to improve on a skill, in what I thought, was a short amount of time because I felt like I could have gotten an A in this class, but it was hard to improve my skills in a short amount of time, especially the ones I was not good at.*
- *I like that this class has a bit of a laid back agenda. Both the teacher and the student can decide on which direction to go in next, especially when we were doing the debates, or trying to increase our skills in a certain area. Also in this class we manage to learn and cover a lot of information, but there is almost no extra homework to do, which eliminates the stress that may come along with other classes.*
- *Usually when a teacher gives you back a grade, you can tell exactly how you are doing, because it tells you as a percent. With this grading system, there is a lot of room for interpretation for how you are doing, which can be hard to build on.*
- *I felt that it was much harder to get a perfect grade, so I worked a little harder than I would to receive a perfect grade in another class.*
- *I do feel like the feedback in this class was helpful. I think that the standards based grading and focusing on growth rather than what you can do at a certain period of time is very interesting. I liked being able to reassess different skills to be able to actually track development. I hope that this system of grading can be implemented into different classes because I do believe that growth is the most important factor in education.*
- *I think that Standards Based Grading was helpful over the long-term for this class. SBG allowed me to improve upon specific skill sets over time, rather than being evaluated on something once and then moving on as in traditional grading. Because we get to learn from our mistakes and improve upon them in this class, I believe that this class was more effective in teaching me information than in a traditionally graded class, as my skills were reiterated and improved upon over time.*
- *I believe that one of the best things about this class was the absence of tests. I think that this absence allowed me to focus more on learning the actual information in the class rather than focusing solely on what I needed to know for a test or quiz. Additionally, I enjoyed the debates we had. I liked how we were able to debate topics we had an interest in as a group and pick the side we agreed with, rather than being assigned a topic and a side as I have in past classes. Another thing I thoroughly enjoyed was our discussions of current events. For that reason, I believe that this class is very important in the scheme of preparing us for the real world, which I believe holds strong value.*
- *I believe SBG made me more motivated to succeed, because of how it is structured. Because you are given the opportunity to improve upon past work, and receive the higher grade as*

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opposed to the average, it encouraged me to do better because the rewards were higher.

I believe strongly that standards based grading was the right choice for my students in this course. The conversations we had throughout the year remained entirely focused on learning and their skill development. This is a refreshing change. There are many benefits of standards based grading in any setting and in an elective course there are few drawbacks. It is time consuming to give such quality feedback so often, but in a small class, (1st semester I had only 8 students and 2nd semester I had only 10 students) and in a class that doesn't have to cover a prescribed amount of material, this can be done. The students each had a folder with very specific skills listed and their level of mastery on each skill is clearly marked. Students could clearly see the development of their skills. They can see easily where they have achieved growth, and where they need to work harder. This is the hallmark of quality feedback and it is easy to see the students benefitted even if they felt they had to work harder to achieve the same results.

Implications:

I have concluded that standards based grading is the gold standard for how best to assess learning in any classroom. In a class focused on skill development, this is particularly appropriate. However, there are practical considerations in a content rich class with a set amount of content that needs to be covered in a specific amount of time that make it very challenging. Therefore I am going to try to implement certain aspects of the standards based grading model in my other classes next year. For example, I plan to dissect my tests so that each question is associated with a skill and/or content topic. This will allow students to retest on parts of each unit to promote mastery. I also will look for ways to include more choice for students within my other classes as choice and goal setting can be very important to increase student motivation.