

BYRAM HILLS CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT  
ARMONK, NEW YORK

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**Title of Project:** *Implementing a Standards Based Grading Approach in the Film I Curriculum*

**Year:** 2015- 2016

**School/Grade:** Byram Hills High School, Grades 9 - 12

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SUMMARY OF *INVESTIGATORS OF PRACTICE* ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

**Context:**

The art program at Byram Hills currently serves a population of students who want to know more about the art and aesthetic of Filmmaking. Film I is an art course that covers the theory, skill, techniques and aesthetics of film/digital video and editing. The program is authentic. I do my best to include a variety of industry-oriented approaches that introduce my students to this very popular art form. My students experience the same historical and aesthetic challenges faced by all filmmakers. However, I thought that my students concerns often center on the product and the grade rather than the quality of the work. I wanted a better way to reduce their anxiety about project grades. I wanted an approach that improved skills and fostered creative risks.

Last year I really got excited about the possibilities associated with Standard Based Grading (SBG). This is a system of evaluation where traditional A, B, C... scoring is replaced by an established set of learning goals and performance standards. Students receive feedback about how well they have mastered standards in the form of 1- 5 ratings. Students are also provided multiple opportunities to practice and improve standards independently through class work. Final grades are determined based on the level of mastery at the end of the quarter rather than an average of scores from traditional project assessments.

I decided that SBG would be a good strategy that would best complement the formative assessment approaches I currently use in my art classes. During my research, the SBG process encouraged me to reexamine the current curriculum. I was better able to determine of what real value each skill, technique or concept had in the overall course. I discovered that some content needed to be eliminated or reordered to better serve my students. I prepared standards as separate elements of knowledge and skills. I concluded that this approach would provide the best direction and flexibility. I could now address specific knowledge and skills and could best serve my film I students. More importantly, I would be better able to link my identified standards within specific projects and skill activities.

**Action Plan:**

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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. I decided to examine how SBG could best measure students' understanding of content in the current Film I curriculum. I collected data from the text and the Internet. I also create an online questionnaire for my students asking what value they placed on grade as compared to knowing the content.

From my survey, I was actually encouraged to learn that my students valued knowledge of content more than grades. Linking identified standards to specific projects would make the SBG approach a natural fit. In my Film I class, I will often field the question, "How long should my film be?" My usual answer is, "How long do you think it should be?" I'm happy that my students want to produce a film at a reasonable length. However, I also wanted the question to be more qualitative, rather than quantitative. The research supports my experience; high performing students are good at "gaming" the system. They want to know what to do in order to get the best possible grade.

I want the students to get the best possible result. When I tie the assessments with the learning objective / standard, they realize that the length of a movie is actually arbitrary. "How long should my film be?" My answer remains the same, but now I will add, "...and what standard relates to a movie's length best?" How long the movie runs is still their choice, but they are now accountable to one or more standards where "runtime" connects specifically to the quality of understanding.

### **Results:**

From the beginning of this spring semester until the present, I began putting much of my theory into practice.

This method provides teachers with specific guidance for how students should apply knowledge. However, there are risks in using this method that must be taken into consideration. First, the system can be forcefully prescriptive in that the list of performance tasks or performance activities becomes a mandated set of activities in which teachers and students must engage. Also, the subject area knowledge that a performance task or performance activity is intended to address might not always be obvious. In addition, there have been unintended and intangible qualities that I never considered measuring, but are just as beneficial to the program. For example, since implementing the SBG approach in my film I class, there's been a noticeable increase in students who spend spare time (lunch, afterschool and free periods) working in the studio to improve or refine work.

Work continues to be student centered and I value my ability to keep things relatively organized. However, experience is clarity. I was able to generate a letter home to parents based on the template other colleagues were using in other subject areas. My current document is three pages long. I first introduce Standards Based Grading; I highlight its overall purpose and why I think it complements the learning in my art room. I then explained how it all works and what their children can expect to see on their

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assessments. Finally, I explained how this looks when reinterpreted back into a traditional grading system. I even included a place where they could search keywords and articles about SBG. I was surprised when none of my parents called or emailed. Truthfully, I think this is due to the increase familiarity parents have with SBG from some other classes who have been using this approach for several semesters.

The only real confusion was when I began posting student “standard evaluations” to the district’s parent portal. Students immediately began asking me questions about “grades.” The clarity of the classroom discussions was lost once formal evaluations were posted to the portal. Immediately, students began meeting with me to discuss their grades and why I thought they had performed poorly. After some private and group discussion, I further clarified the new evaluation procedure as it relates to the Parent Portal. Byram Hills students are accustomed to checking the Parent Portal for project grades. The portal allows for individualized standard columns to rate progress from a 1 – 5 rubric. However, students became concerned when the system automatically calculated scores around or below 5 percent. I decided to take some time in each class to restate the grading system. However, this time, I included several examples of how an artwork is assessed through standards. I even demonstrated how refining their work to meet or exceed standards is more useful tool than a summative grade.

Overall, I believe the quality of work has increased through this improved system been better than in previous semesters. Conversations and discussions are richer because I’ve been able to clarify a significant amount of the content. In the past, I might have suggested to a student that he or she “clean up” a title card. Students know exactly what to change in order to improve the standard. Additionally, more of my students are coming into work on and improve projects.

Communication is very important. I have designed my learning standards to be clear as possible and I continue to refine them as students progress through the semester. Again, I have noticed that students strive more to improve skill sets and illustrate cinematic concepts in more refined and sophisticated ways. Moreover, I’ve been introducing advanced techniques earlier and to a broader number of students. Therefore, it’s become even more important to me that students use the proper “film” vocabulary more regularly. When asking questions, students can describe the effect but cannot remember the exact term. Currently, this is where a remediate most. Usually, it’s through informal conversation and formative discussion. However, it’s important to me that students continue to discuss and share insights with each other. Using the proper language can only promote clarity.

### **Implications:**

Some improvements I will be pursuing:

- Adapt the standards so that there are fewer per lesson. My first assignment introduced my students to 12 standards. Although things were never chaotic, it was a challenge to watch each and every film while rating a dozen or so standards. I’m very happy that the quality of work improved and I’m very happy with the standards

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I've outlined. However, if I'm ever going to expand this approach to my other film classes or art curriculum, I would like to improve the process so I can efficiently manage more of the curriculum.

- In a standard rating scale of 1- 5, a rating of 3 “meets” the standard. I encourage students who score below a 3 to voluntarily polish their work and resubmit a week later. Monitoring resubmissions could be a challenge when expanded throughout the film program.
- I will continue to refine project rubrics. As projects become more sophisticated I will need better rubrics that measures an understanding of context and inference within advanced movie narratives / artwork.
- Making time to remediate and help students. Do I want to devise an online reflection system where students can have access to all current rubrics?
- I have now started to break down my lessons in the succeeding classes, Film II and film workshop to understand where skill, areas and techniques progress and identify what content might need to be reevaluated for redundancy or irrelevance. Moreover, I think that the next natural progression would be for students to define their own natural questions and relative topics of study.

Fortunately, there's a lot of really good information and strategies for any teacher that wants to introduce SBG into his or her classroom. I've also decided that there is current no “one size fits all” approach for the Film curriculum. What I do know is that performance in my film classroom has been improved. Standards Based Grading encourages me to examine my curriculum: Decide what is important for Film I students to know. Determine how student can best master skills, techniques, and concepts. Know what quality work looks like while measuring it in the most fair and efficient way. Finally, It is most important that students use knowledge learned to create thoughtful art while at Byram Hills and in the future.

**Resources:**

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

Smith, Logan. "What Proficiency-based Grading Means for Your Student." N.p., 12 Nov. 2012. Web. 2 Apr. 2016.

Scriffiny, Patrica L. "Seven Reasons for Standards Based Grading." Educational Leadership 66.2 (2008): 70-74. Print.