Thoughts on assessments

Assessment feedback and student feedback literacy

Ralph Emmerink

Abstract

As an educator, and a student myself, I believe that the current system of graded assessments used ubiquitously in education systems worldwide is quite flawed. Although certain issues arise in its implementation, a suitable alternative might be to consider gradeless assessments. Thus, rather than completely advocating for a change in the way educators use graded assessments within their classrooms, I suggest a shift towards an increased focus on assessment feedback and student feedback literacy. As such, this paper aims to advocate and campaign for a different and more enabling approach to current assessment practices, emphasising student learning and growth.

Key words: assessment; feedback; formative; student feedback literacy

Introduction

It has been over 25 years, but I still remember it like yesterday. One of my teachers called home the week before the Christmas holiday to tell my parents that it was probably better for me to finish the year at the HAVO level rather than the more academically rigorous VWO level. To clarify: in the Netherlands, students enrol in a secondary school based on their (academic) abilities. Whereas HAVO students enrol in a five-year programme, allowing them to transfer to a university of applied science (i.e. a vocational university), VWO students enrol in a six-year programme and can directly transfer to a 'regular' research university. In hindsight, I would have been perfectly able to complete my education at VWO; I was just an awful test-taker (and, to be honest, I still am), often receiving relatively low scores on summative tests. Unfortunately, those poor test results led to the 'academic demotion' described.

One can hardly say that this experience instilled a lot of academic confidence in me at that time. After becoming a teacher, completing two master's degrees and currently pursuing an EdD, I can genuinely say that I always dreaded assessed work, tests, assignments and the like. And although this fear was less present two years ago when I was completing my second master's, the fear of failing a course, knowing perfectly well that I probably did quite satisfactorily, was pervasive. Furthermore, once I figured out that it was possible to graduate with distinction, grades became an external motivator to achieve rather than an internal motivation to learn. This perspective on grades also transpires in my professional context as a teacher. It is my belief that grades are

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irrelevant to learning, mainly serving as an external motivator and point of discussion between student and teacher. I cannot count the number of times students have asked to get higher grades because they, in their opinion, deserved it or needed it, for whatever reason. Thus, on both a personal and professional level, I echo the sentiments of Will, who states: 'The more you work to get kids to believe in learning for the sake of learning, the better they become as learners for the rest of their lives. When you put a grade on something, learning stops. That's the worst thing about grades. And as teachers, we should want learning to go on forever'.[1]

Graded assessments are ubiquitous in educational systems worldwide, serving the main tasks of reporting and communicating student achievements. Research, however, indicates that graded assessments are generally unhelpful regarding this intended purpose.[2] Grades, in general, fail to provide feedback on student performance or provide accurate information to students allowing them to understand and improve upon their deficiencies.[3]

I believe it is imperative to consider gradeless assessments as an alternative to graded assessments to alleviate some of the issues related to using grades within schooling systems. However, I also recognise that this might be a utopian change, as will be explained later. Thus, rather than drastically changing how grades are currently used, I suggest shifting the attention to an increased focus on assessment feedback and, subsequently, student feedback literacy. This paper aims to illuminate these thoughts to advocate and campaign for a different and more enabling approach to current assessment practices. I will start by providing a brief historical overview of the use and purpose of grades in education prior to refuting the usefulness of these purposes. Next, I introduce and explain the proposed changes I envision. Again, I am fully aware that all change is challenging, burdensome and sometimes even impossible. Still, I hope to seek progressive change in adopting a critical stance on the current status quo via critically engaging with this topic.

The purpose of grades

Reflecting on the use of graded assessments within education, it is interesting to recognise that grades themselves have only been commonplace for just over a century. It was only around the era of World War I that educational systems in both the United States and Europe started issuing grades to students. That said, some universities in both the United States and Europe did use grades from the 19th century.[4] In some educational systems, schools provided percentages, whereas others provided letters or raw numbers. Some schools included an 'effort' or 'behaviour' category, whereas others did not. What did become necessary, and customary, was the idea that 'all classes in a school issued grades to students, and those grades accounting to an indicator of

student ability and achievement.'[5] Around this time, grades began to be regarded as communicators of academic progress and attainment to the outside world. In other words, they became commonly used to communicate information about students' progress and academic mastery to other stakeholders, such as parents.

As it seems, most educational systems worldwide appreciate a standardised method for grades. Therefore, Brookhart *et al.* identify grades as the most common academic measure.[6] But there continues to be an ongoing debate about the efficacy of using grades to evaluate student achievement and document their learning progression. Schinske and Tanner identify four primary purposes of grading systems, providing ample evidence to refute each of these purposes.[7]

First and foremost, grades allegedly provide feedback on student performance but, in reality, 'do not appear to provide effective feedback that constructively informs students' future efforts'.[8] Butler and Nissan arrived at a similar conclusion, asserting that providing evaluative feedback in the form of a letter grade, percentage, or written praise or criticism, does not appear to augment students' future academic performance when assessed assessment tasks of similar style and fashion.[9]

Second, grades are used as a motivational tool, as a method to prompt students' efforts. Whereas educators would surely appreciate using grades as a motivator for students with a focus on learning, it seems that grades have an opposite and detrimental effect. Grading high-achieving students will result in motivating them to acquire even higher grades, regardless of whether this goal imbricates learning. In general, 'grading lowers interest in learning and enhances anxiety and extrinsic motivation, especially among those students who are struggling'.[10] As such, grades do not seem to be beneficial to enhance students' motivation.

Third, grades are used as a tool for comparing students. In most educational systems around the world, a curve method is used, in which student work is graded against the work of peers rather than against a rubric.[11] This forces unwanted competition among students. Indeed, curved grading increases competition among students, which is far more detrimental to learning compared to a classroom where there is cooperation among students. Seymour and Hewitt believe that the competitive environment created due to curved grading constitutes one of the factors contributing to the loss of talented and qualified students from science fields.[12] Another issue related to curved grades is that they can disconnect grades from any relevant meaning regarding content knowledge and learning. In short, using a curve method 'creates a competitive classroom environment, alienates certain groups of talented students, and often results in grades unrelated to content mastery. Curving is therefore not the fairest way to assign grades.'[13]

Last, grades are utilised to evaluate student knowledge objectively. Again, however, there is ample evidence that this purpose is rarely achieved. Grades do not provide reliable information about student learning and are often used inconsistently, both for

a single teacher or instructor and among different teachers and instructors. The use of rubrics and multiple-choice tests can alleviate these issues somewhat. However, their use still leaves us with grades that provide little to no (or even misleading) information on student knowledge, which impedes critical or higher-order thinking.[14]

The previous paragraphs have discussed why grades within education do not achieve their primary purpose. However, there are alternatives, as I will highlight in the next section.

Gradeless assessment – a utopia?

One alternative to using graded assessments is to go gradeless. McMorran and Ragupathi argue that 'calls for gradeless learning stem from the belief that grades have become a problem that negatively impacts student learning, by incentivising learning for the wrong reasons (the grade) and increasing stress among students'.[15] There have been some experiments with gradeless assessment in school systems around the world, predominantly in higher education. McMorran *et al.* and Mcmorran and Ragupathi investigate the efforts of one Asian university implementing gradeless learning.[16] The authors mention certain benefits of implementing such a scheme. Faculty and students generally understand and agree with the motives behind gradeless learning and the development of lifelong learning attributes. However, they conclude by recognising the pitfalls of graded assessment, as mentioned before, and identifying issues with gradeless learning, 'namely poor learning attitudes and behaviours, which arise when grades can no longer be relied on to motivate learning'.[17]

In a similar study, Spring *et al.* concluded that when a medical school in the United States switched to a pass/fail evaluation, students' wellbeing was enhanced and their academic performance was evidently not affected.[18] However, there were ramifications for students' future residency programme options due to the preference for tiered-grading systems. Furthermore, from a professional context and my professional experience, I would like to add that students and parents are incredibly grade-oriented, especially in Asia. Most students attending the international school I am employed at associate good grades with increased access to preferable universities in the USA, the UK and Australia.

The concept of grades is relatively embedded in educational systems worldwide, and gradeless assessment might indeed be a utopia. So, what is the alternative? One avenue worth exploring might be an increased focus on assessment feedback and student feedback literacy. By delaying grade decisions (i.e. awarding grades at a later stage), providing more frequent and immediate feedback on students' performance and ensuring that the feedback provided is constructive, maximally formative and minimally punitive, teachers can provide students with the opportunity and motivation

to improve their learning.[19] I will explore these alternatives in more detail in the following paragraphs.

Assessment feedback and student feedback literacy

Rather than pursuing the option of implementing a system of gradeless assessments, I propose to shift the attention to an enhanced focus on feedback for learning and, subsequently, student feedback literacy.

Feedback for learning, or how students can reduce the 'gap' between where they 'are' and where they are 'meant to be', is one of the most powerful tools that teachers can use to enhance student learning, leading 'to greater student engagement and higher achievement'.[20] Furthermore, rather than solely focusing on feedback that addresses how students are doing in their learning progression, it is more beneficial to focus on the question of what students can still do to progress their learning. In other words, teachers should try to provide students with information that allows them to identify their next steps, giving information that leads to greater learning possibilities. In the words of Hattie and Timperley, 'it is closing the gap between where students are and where they are aiming to be that leads to the power of feedback'.[21] In short, providing feedback can be a tremendously powerful tool in the classroom, but there is also the notion that it goes beyond simply providing comments to students about their learning and the quality of their work. Effective feedback should highlight the central role of the student in the feedback process.[22]

Therefore, it is imperative to understand and focus on the concept of student feedback literacy. Students must have a certain level of feedback literacy to have the ability to read, interpret and use feedback to improve upon their learning. Student feedback literacy entails the students' 'understandings, capacities, and dispositions needed to make sense of information and use it to enhance work or learning strategies'.[23] In other words, when teachers provide feedback to students, we often expect them to have the tacit knowledge of what to do with the feedback, understand its purpose or how they can act upon it. This is, however, a false notion.[24] Research indicates that, although teachers often put in a lot of effort when providing feedback, students generally do not know where to find it, are generally dissatisfied with it or fail to understand how to act upon the feedback provided.[25] A solution to this problem would be to enhance students' understanding of feedback, or feedback literacy, to ensure they become active participants in the process.[26] Thus: '"feedback literacy" enables the receiver's perception of feedback to come to the fore, be examined more closely and optimised to support enhanced student performance and competency development'.[27]

So how can we ensure that we, as educators, are developing the feedback literacy of our students? Carless and Boud developed a framework consisting of four interrelated

components that underpin student feedback literacy.[28] This framework is discussed in greater detail in the following paragraphs.

Developing student feedback literacy

In an effort to enable the student uptake of feedback provided by teachers and instructors, Carless and Boud developed a framework that would allow for the development of student feedback literacy.[29] Carless and Boud assert that 'students with well-developed feedback literacy appreciate their own active role in feedback processes; are continuously developing capacities in making sound judgments about academic work, and manage affect in positive ways'.[30] Their framework is based on four interrelated components that, when combined, maximise students' potential to enhance their feedback literacy and develop their understanding and learning.

- First of all, it is crucial to have students appreciate feedback and understand and acknowledge its role in their ability to improve upon their work and their role in the feedback process. Feedback-literate students 'recognise that feedback information comes in different forms and from different sources.'[31] Furthermore, students with enhanced feedback literacy skills are able to use technology to access, store and revisit feedback to improve their learning.
- Second, feedback-literate students can develop specific capacities allowing them to make sound judgements regarding their and their peers' work. Furthermore, they actively and productively participate in the feedback processes. The latter indicates that feedback is 'a dialogic and relational activity'.[32] To add to this, Hill and West advocate for a cyclical and iterative approach to providing feedback, focusing on student-teacher interaction and conversations.[33] Carless is also identic in advocating for a student-teacher partnership when giving and receiving feedback.[34]
- The third element revolves around the managing of affect. Students with increased feedback literacy are able to 'maintain emotional equilibrium and avoid defensiveness when receiving critical feedback'.[35] Furthermore, these students actively seek feedback, suggestions and improvements from peers and teachers to enhance their work, thus developing habits that allow them to strive for improvement continuously.
- The fourth and last element entails taking action. Feedback-literate students are aware of their responsibilities to act upon feedback received. Additionally, they can 'draw inferences from a range of feedback experiences for the purpose of continuous improvement'.[36] Lastly, feedback-literate students also, over time, develop a wide range of different strategies to act upon feedback.

Ultimately, these four components are envisioned to work together to construct a framework that enables students to respond to feedback appropriately, enhance their

uptake of feedback and, consequently, improve learning outcomes. In particular, the framework 'enables us to articulate the role of learners in actively seeking information, making judgements themselves, recognising feedback as a reciprocal process, and using information for the benefit of their future work'.[37] It must be noted that Boud and Carless, furthermore, discuss two enabling activities that, according to them, support the implementation of their framework by reinforcing the appreciation of students for feedback, allowing them to practise providing feedback and making judgements, and furthering student action.[38] These two activities are peer feedback and the analysis of exemplars. The former develops student feedback literacy as students learn to appreciate the value of (peer) feedback and, additionally, are coached and guided to deliver it and carry it out effectively. The latter, the analysis of exemplars, can aid students in appreciating 'how quality is manifested, enhance their capacities to make sound academic judgments, and draw appropriate inferences for actions to improve their own work'.[39]

In conclusion, as specified earlier, the provision of feedback should be dialogical and an ongoing, continuous interaction between teachers and students, focusing on the way forward rather than describing what the student already did.[40] Thus, the role of the teacher in this process should not be misunderstood, as is the vital role of the student. Ideally, there should be a partnership between teacher and student resonating 'the need for social constructivist approaches to feedback where knowledge and understanding are co-constructed'.[41] Such a partnership between teacher and student will allow both parties to benefit mutually from enhanced student feedback literacy. Lastly, it is imperative to mention that Carless and Boud's framework is purely theoretical and has yet to be implemented in a study researching its effectiveness (see also Molloy *et al.*).[42] Furthermore, as a secondary teacher, I can envision that their framework, created to be implemented in tertiary education, will need to be adapted before implementation in a secondary school setting.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to provide evidence that graded assessments are not only detrimental to students' mental health but also impede learning and academic progress, among other reasons. And although a shift to gradeless assessments might be somewhat of a utopia still, I believe that an increased focus on feedback for learning, combined with developing students' feedback literacy, would be an excellent alternative. Feedback for learning will aid students as it provides them with information on how to proceed their learning to where they need to be in their learning journey. Improving their feedback literacy, for example, by utilising Carless and Boud's framework, will allow them to act upon feedback received more effectively, ultimately improving their

learning experiences. In the end, I like to think that most educators are familiar with the issues surrounding assessment and grades in their classrooms. I also like to think that educators are willing to explore and experiment with possible alternatives to this current system, such as the ones proposed in this paper.

Ralph Emmerink is an international teacher currently working and residing in Guangzhou, China, where he works as a secondary school teacher. He is in the process of obtaining his EdD at the University of Sheffield.

ralph.emmerink@gmail.com

Notes

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