

## Grade Posting

Caleb Cheung, 2002

During my first year of teaching, I received a lot of advice about organizing my classroom to help my students succeed. Among the advice was the suggestion to post grades regularly to hold students accountable for their academic grades. This made sense to me because it helped me when I was in school. Over the past six years, grade posting has become a regular part of my teaching routine. I started by creating a simple computer spreadsheet to show missing assignments. Then slowly it evolved into a collection of student records and formulas that calculate totals, percentages, and letter grades. Once a week, I posted a version of this spreadsheet with student id numbers in place of names to keep the grades confidential.

In recent years, I incorporated a citizenship grade based on the number of tardies and detentions. With much pride, I even programmed the spreadsheet to print marks directly onto the scantron report card documents to indicate grades, diminishing the time for preparing these documents by hand. I quickly realized how efficient a computerized grade book could be. By using a computer, I could easily calculate and adjust individual and class grades as needed.

Besides the amount of time I saved as a teacher, the benefits to the students also seemed significant. Students who were normally oblivious to their grade until the end of the report card period became more aware of how their daily work resulted in the grade they earned. There were no secret grade formulas. I followed the standard percentages for grade assignments as set by the school. I did not play favorites. Everyone was treated in exactly the same way except for students with special needs. When surveyed, all my students consider grade posting helpful.

If a parent came to visit, I simply pointed to the grade sheet and asked them to reference their child's number. A quick glance not only revealed their grades, but also the justification. The students were never able to make excuses such as "I didn't know my grade" or "I don't know what I'm missing."

The list of completed and uncompleted assignments provided a concrete way for my students to take control of their grades. Students who were disorganized and had a difficult time keeping track of their work now had a clear picture of where they stood. There was increased motivation to complete and turn in assignments. Most of all, I thought I was providing weekly feedback about their academic achievement and behavior to motivate each student to improve. In line with my district's directive to improve grades and test scores, I was giving them a tool for success.

Over time, I realized there were a number of problems with posting grades. A colleague pointed out to me that grades often became the center of attention for my students and me. For example, when grades were posted at the beginning of the week, the attention of the whole class shifted solely on the grades. During the week, I found myself frequently reminding students to check their grade and encouraging them to

keep up with their work. Some students wanted to check their grade at every opportunity, creating a constant anxiety or obsession over grades. The emphasis on good grades at my school furthered the issue. Students were bombarded with the message that high grades were the main purpose of their education. I thought I was setting high expectations by providing accountability. Instead, the grades took the focus of the class away from learning.

While most students used the grade postings to maintain their work, others bragged about A's or stopped trying when they consistently received F's. Discouraged, some of these students gave up. A student even told me his grade "means the end of the world. I know I need to do a bundle of work, but now it's too late." Some students settled for a C or a B as "good enough" and saw no need to try harder. Even though I kept student numbers confidential, there was grade comparison and teasing among some students. I tried my best to address these issues by talking about them with the class, but it was unavoidable for students to label themselves or others based on the grade they received. The letter grades in and of themselves carried meaning outside of their academic accomplishments. For students, an A equated to excellent, good, or knowing everything. An F meant you were bad, did not try at all, or did not know anything, regardless of how much a student may have improved from their particular starting point. Some A students received high grades because they were really good at completing assignments, not necessarily from learning the material. I realized high grades do not always equal high learning, nor do low grades correspond to lack of learning.

To combat some of these habits, I increasingly accepted late work and makeup work as a way for students to improve their grade. In their minds, completion became more important than learning. This led to some students copying and cheating to receive high grades as all costs. Most importantly, the feedback these grade postings provided were limited to completion. Areas for improvement and mastery of a skill or subject were not communicated by these letter grades.

I now know that grade reporting is just a tool. Like many other techniques of education, it has limitations. As a teacher in an urban, low performing school, I wonder if grade posting has done more harm than good. Although grades are unavoidable in my school culture, are there alternatives I can provide in my classroom to motivate students to learn? What can I do to deemphasize grades and emphasize learning? Is there a way to supplement or modify grade posting to present a more complete picture of a student's learning progress? How can I communicate the appropriate feedback and teach 160 students a day?