Grading: The Issue Is Not How but Why (*)
Grading Rationale I: Sorting

Level 1. These are the most superficial concerns, such as these limited to the practical issue of how to grade students' work. Here we find articles and books offering elaborate formulas for scoring assignments, computing grades, and writing reports. (The so-called standards movement in education, a common buzzword these days, is often focused on this level of assessment.)

Level 2. Here educators call the above problems into question, asking whether traditional grading really is so necessary or so useful for assessing students' performance. Alternative assessments, often designated as "authentic," belong in this category. The idea here is to provide a richer, deeper description of students' achievement. (Portfolios of students' work are sometimes commended to us in this context, but when a portfolio is used merely as a means of arriving at a traditional grade, it might more accurately be grouped under Level 1.)

Level 3. Rather than challenging grades alone at the challenge of the whole enterprise of assessment — and specifically why we are evaluating students as opposed to how we are doing so. No matter how elaborate or carefully designed an assessment strategy may be, the result will not be constructive if our reason for wanting to know how students are doing is itself objectionable.

One reason for evaluating students is to be able to label them as the basis of their performance and to sort them into low- and high-ability categories. Sorting, in turn, has been criticized at each of the three levels, and for very different reasons. At Level 1, it is argued that grades are not only too narrow, but that they are meaningless in terms of the goals that educators say they seek to achieve. The major problem here is that grades are not comparable across different contexts. Even relatively enlightened programs that emphasize performance assessment and — a common buzzword these days — outcomes. (It also manifests itself in the view of education as an investment, a way of preparing people to be productive members of society, people who have been led to think about what they will receive for engaging in a task (or for doing it well) are apt to do lower quality work than those who are not expecting to get anything at all."

At Level 2, questions are raised about whether grades are reliable enough to allow students to be sorted effectively. Indeed, studies show that any particular teacher may well give different grades to a single piece of work submitted at two different times. Naturally the variation is even greater when the work is evaluated by more than one teacher (Kirschenbaum et al. 1971). What grades offer is spurious precision, a subjective measure.