Grading: The Issue Is Not How but Why (*
Grading: The Issue at Hand But Why

By Alfie Kohn

Why are we concerned with evaluating how well students are doing? The question of motive, as an educational policy, leads us to rethink basic tenets of teaching and learning and to evaluate what students have done in a manner more consistent with our ultimate educational objectives. But set all approaches to the topic result in a sort of thoughtful reflection. In fact, approaches to assessment may be classified according to their depth of analysis and the philosophical assumptions about how and why we grade. Consider the following framework for grading.

Level 1: These are the most simplistic concerns, such as the limited practical issue of how to grade students’ work, here we find articles and books offering elaborate formulas for assigning grades, competing points, and assigning grades. This sort of analysis is frequent, but it is rare for anyone to challenge the entire enterprise of evaluation.

Level 2: Here educators call the above premises into question, asking whether traditional grading really is necessary or useful for assessing students’ performance. Alternative assessments, often designated as “authentic assessments,” are supposed to be designed to grade students more deeply. (Portfolios of student work, deeper descriptions of work, etc.) There is a common belief that these portfolios are used merely as a means of arriving at a traditional grade, it might not more accurately be graded under Level 1.

Level 3: Rather than challenging grades along almost every dimension of assessment — and specifically why we are supposed to do how we are doing so. No matter how elaborate or carefully designed an assessment strategy may be, the result will not be a constructive one if our reason for wanting to know how students are doing is itself objectionable.

One reason for evaluating students is to help us determine whether they are learning sufficiently well. In effect, we ask them to do work and then see if they have done it. As a result, in the more effective schools, students usually are led to think that school is all about doing homework. The major prerequisite for doing homework is that it isn’t an obvious waste of time. The grades students receive for this work, then, are supposed to reflect the extent to which they have met the requirements of that work.

At Level 1, questions are raised about whether grades are a complete and accurate reflection of a student’s true worth. Educators here blame students who have earned grades that are lower than they should have. This, in turn, has the effect of reducing schools to a level of rhetoric at which students are supposed to be doing far better than they are doing. It is here that research suggests that grades can be used in a manner more consistent with our ultimate educational objectives. But not all approaches to the topic result in this sort of thoughtful reflection. In fact, approaches to assessment may be classified according to their depth of analysis and the philosophical assumptions about how and why we grade.

Grading Rationale II: Motivation

A second rationale for grades — and indeed, one of the major obstacles to assessing students more accurately is their low salaries. Why do we continue to grade students who are not being paid? (Schaps 1993)。“Grades for Gifted Students” (In this category, 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

While conventional grades persist, teachers and parents ought to do everything in their power to help students forget about them. Here are some practical suggestions for reducing the salience.

1. Refrain from giving a letter grade for homework or for participation in class, even if you are compelled to give one at the end of the term. The data suggest that substantive comments should replace, not supplement, grades (Butler 1988). Make sure the effect of doing this is not to create suspense about what students are going to get on their report cards, which would defeat the whole purpose. Some older students may experience, especially at first, a sense of existential vertigo: a steady supply of grades has defined them. The problem may be compounded if students have come to think that grades are something that follow when we provide them with engaging tasks and a supportive environment.

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2. The best evidence we have is that our students are doing quite well. In the more effective schools, students usually are led to think that school is all about doing homework. The major prerequisite for doing homework is that it isn’t an obvious waste of time. The grades students receive for this work, then, are supposed to reflect the extent to which they have met the requirements of that work. It is here that research suggests that grades can be used in a manner more consistent with our ultimate educational objectives. But not all approaches to the topic result in this sort of thoughtful reflection. In fact, approaches to assessment may be classified according to their depth of analysis and the philosophical assumptions about how and why we grade.

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