Grading for Growth: Introducing New Assessment Approaches in Traditional Grading Models

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Alfie Kohn has said that impressive teachers are the ones who hate the process of giving grades (Kohn, 1999). It is not our intent to declare that we are an impressive group of teachers, but perhaps our struggle to find a better way to assess writing is an indicator of professional competence. Our dirty little secret is that we hate assigning grades to our students' writing. Assessing writing offers unique challenges -- in part because we know that by its nature, writing is recursive and discursive, so grading it may actually be disruptive to the very skills we are trying to teach.

Our school is a college preparatory, parochial high school, and our students tend to be exactly like the students Kohn warns about: more concerned with grades than learning, and very likely to feel defined by the letter grade that is assigned to them. This has proven problematic for us, especially considering recent school-wide focus on growth mindsets. Growth mindset is the belief that intelligence can be changed and grown (Ricci, 2017, p. 2). People with a growth mindset believe that cherished qualities – like being a good writer – can be developed. Such people "admire effort, for no matter what your ability is, effort is what ignites that ability and turns it into accomplishment" (Dweck, 2008, p. 41).

Certainly, a growth mindset has implications in any classroom, but the writing classroom seems like a rich territory to explore its potential. Traditional approaches to writing assessment, in which the teacher leaves comments on the final draft, do little to build a growth mindset because "feedback that is deferred until after the summative task has been completed is unlikely to affect students' understanding because students' attention is now focused on a new topic" (Fisher and Frey, 2013, p. 66). We understand as teachers of writing that students need to find their own agency in the process of revision in relationship to the comments provided by the teacher to move from "teacher-centered commands to teacher-student partnership" (Sommers, 2013, p. xiv). In such an approach, the marginal comments become central to, not aside from, the writing process. Even the most insightful comments left on a summative assessment "will not move a student forward" because they become "isolated moments and not bridges between assignments" (Sommers, 2013, p. 10).

It seems clear to us that making comments and marking a paper with a letter grade does little to encourage our students to learn from mistakes rather than fear them. In its 2016 *Revised Report on Writing*, the National Council of Teachers of English states explicitly that "everyone has the capacity to write," but developing writers requires a supportive environment which allows students to correct and revise after making mistakes rather than simply being docked in the final grade for them. Writing is uniquely messy and personal, so a path to a growth mindset about writing is as varied as our students.

But cutting this path to a growth mindset in the writing classroom within our school environment offers some challenges. As a college preparatory school, our school has a culture focused on developing a student profile that is recognized by colleges and universities as rigorous. Not unlike most schools with traditional grading models, academic policies in our school tend to see student progression as uniform and timely. How, we wondered, might we manipulate this system in a way that is more supportive of a writing pedagogy that encourages students to see failure as a way to "reflect and redirect" in order to revise to meet the challenges of a writing task (Ricci, 2017, p. 69)? Such reflection and redirection had become the cornerstone in our math department when they moved Algebra II to a flipped mastery model several years ago. After hearing about

their successes, we began to consider models of standards-based and mastery grading in ELA, but we realized that much of the literature we found was about school-wide initiatives that reflected a top-down evolution of grading policies rather than the course-by-course and department-by-department approach that was our current reality. Therefore, we began to explore how to embrace some of these best writing assessment practices in the context of a more traditional school-wide framework for grading.

Our Plan

About three years ago, the four authors became frustrated by the recursive nature of our discussions on student progress. At the time, we were discussing student performance on two writing assignments in our courses, English 10 and English 11. In both courses, these writing prompts asked the students to create an argument that synthesized multiple texts, and we worried students were merely complying to expectations, quoting from multiple texts bur failing to truly synthesize an argument.

In English 10, the sophomore writers traced the depiction of Jim Watson in two novels, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (by Mark Twain) and *My Jim* (by Nancy Rawles). The prompt asked the students to defend, challenge or qualify the following statement about these two novels: Nancy Rawles' novel *My Jim* is meant to complement Mark Twain's portrayal of Jim Watson in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. As in any essay, students needed to develop their argument with textual support and anticipate possible counterclaims to their own argument. Similarly, in English 11, students read the dystopian novel, *Brave New World* and an excerpt from Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Earlier, students had been asked to find and summarize a research-based, informational article on the scientific and/or ethical issues raised in *Brave New World*. Much like the sophomore-level prompt, this essay asked the students to defend, challenge, or qualify Postman's claims that Huxley's warnings are just as relevant today as they were when the novel was published. Unlike the sophomores, these students needed to use evidence from three sources: the novel, the excerpt from the passage, and the published class magazine that contained their informational articles.

In collaboration with each other and under the guidance of literacy coach Beth (author 1), Katie, Aubrey, and Maura decided to use mastery grading. We decided to focus on these key areas of the department writing rubric: writing focus, development of ideas, and audience awareness. Because our school ACT data tends to demonstrate our students are largely college-ready in English, we opted to define mastery fairly ambitiously, requiring a score of 85 percent, which on our school grading scale is a B. We felt that while the ACT data was useful, we found that our students still had uneven writing skills and worried that some of our students would not be prepared for the breadth and depth of writing required in college. In order to help our students see their writing potential, we set up a system that required students to revise their essay as many times within the quarter to reach mastery (and some even beyond). Each teacher recorded the grades on the essay for those students who received less than 85 percent as a zero score in the gradebook. The reasoning included that the zero score would motivate the students to revise the essay as quickly as possible to bring up their grades. Students who failed to turn in the essay would also receive a score of zero, but their score was entered as an "NS," or not submitted, which allowed parents and teachers to distinguish between the two very different situations.

In communicating the mastery grading to the students and families, each teacher notified the parents and students with an email that explained how the new grading process worked and what support was available for students seeking mastery. Additionally, notations in the online grading book were used to clarify the process as it unfolded.

Results

All three classroom teachers–Katie, Aubrey, and Maura –saw marked improvement in the students' writing, as recorded by their scores. Because the mastery score was set fairly ambitiously, only about 47 percent of our 121 students entered the process already having met the mastery benchmark, and those students were offered the chance to revise for a higher grade should they chose. By the end of the semester (which marked the end of the process), only seven students fell short of the benchmark, with all but one having scored a C or above. Katie was the only teacher who reported 100 percent mastery, but that may be because she used this grading technique with a short assignment meant to prepare students for a larger synthesis essay given as an end-of-unit assessment. It is likely that her students saw the mastery process as a way to ensure strong performance for a higher-stakes assessment. Nearly a quarter of students chose to revise for an even better grade even after meeting the benchmark score.

We believe that Katie's choice to include this process in a formative assessment may have helped her avoid a problem that both Aubrey and Maura faced with their sophomore students. In the third week of a 9-week term, students were told they had unlimited attempts to meet the benchmark score without penalty and at their own pace through the term's duration. Emails were sent home to parents describing the process, but we anticipated the artificially lowered grades as a result of the zero score would motivate students; however, three weeks later, less than half of the students had resubmitted a paper for consideration. More problematic, about four of Maura's students resubmitted papers identical (or nearly identical) to the original, indicating they may have been testing the process. Aubrey and Maura reconsidered the self-paced nature of the revision process and opted to set a deadline for resubmission, informing students and parents that this would allow teachers to identify who would need additional help, as about 20 percent of our students required a second resubmission before meeting the benchmark.

In our experience, students and parents showed little concern for the low grades as a result of the grading strategy. One guidance counselor told Beth that she believed her students understood that their teachers were artificially lowering their grades as a way to "do what was in their best interest--revise." We sent several emails to parents explaining the process, and the handful of parental replies simply requested teachers confirm a student resubmission or praised the teacher for their thoughtful approach.

For our administration, however, the resulting lowered student grades made it difficult to monitor student progress. For a significant portion of the term, nearly half of English 10 students showed a quarter grade of an F due to the zero score. This tension resulted in the need for Beth to intervene and meet routinely with members of our administration, and the teachers felt pressure to grade papers and enter scores efficiently. We formalized our intervention strategies and gave administration, students and parents a schedule of times when teachers were available to conference with writers. Though we had planned to keep the zero score as a motivator until the very end of the quarter, we chose to enter the highest achieved score two weeks before we had first planned. While we had wanted to continue to use the grade to leverage students, the administration needed a more accurate picture of student performance before entering the final days of the semester. Even so, a handful of students continued with revisions and improved their scores.

A Few Snapshots

The approach each of us took to mastery grading was not uniform, even as we tried to standardize the process. But we do believe we all shared one consistent result: evidence of growth, for teachers and students alike. Below, we will share some of these stories of growth.

Katie

Katie, who was in her sixth year at our school at the time, introduced mastery grading to her English 11 classes. Katie worried her students, most of whom are enrolled in a flipped mastery math class, would resist the idea in English. She writes:

I was pleasantly surprised with their attitude towards the opportunity to revise until they reached a mastery score. As I explained the concept of mastery grading, one student, who typically struggles with writing, said to his classmate, "So we all can get an 85% if we revised this enough? I've never received a B on an essay before." One male student, whose first attempt just met the benchmark score asked, "If we got an 87%, could we still revise our essay?"

The benefit of using mastery grading with my students is the conversations we had about writing that would have never been possible by just handing back the papers with low grades. Even though I write marginal comments on their papers and end notes on all of their essays, mastery grading caused them to have to interpret these comments and seek help to clarify. For my students, the idea of an audience became an apparent concept and not just an abstract idea because they were required to meet with me or an academic coach.

One student, who typically receives a D on papers due to a lack of focus and development of ideas, had multiple conversations with his academic coach and me. Though he had to revise his paper twice, he met my expectations. Students such as him had to confront my marginal comments in conversation. Conversations such as these, which we do not always have time for at the high school level, are needed to produce better writers, not just better writing.

Aubrey

Aubrey was also in her sixth year of teaching at the time but was in her first at our school. Her English PLC opted to try the mastery approach with sophomores on a comparative essay. Before starting mastery grading, Aubrey

had one student whose writing lagged significantly behind his classwork. She writes:

The first time he completed his comparative analysis, he received a D+. His work lacked focus despite our writing conferences where it seemed that he could verbally explain his thoughts and ideas. We even came up with a sound thesis together, one that would connect and elaborate on the ideas he verbally recited to me as his interpretation of the prompt.

After receiving the low score on the paper, he was concerned and frustrated with what he thought was a well-developed paper. He had worked hard, and I know he read the material. Using the mastery grading system, I encouraged him to try again using the same thesis that we originally developed, but with clear connections to the thesis in each body paragraph. He met with me briefly to go over my thoughts and interpret the notes I included with his rubric. After several sessions meeting with other students during study halls and after school, I was surprised that this student in particular was not taking advantage of the one-on-one time with me or other English teachers. However, I was even more surprised when he handed me a hefty paper with a smile on his face. He had been meeting with an Academic Coach who had been briefed on the paper, as well as family members who took the time to help him rework his original draft. The paper was beyond a 10th grader. It had depth and focus, firm transitions, and above all, deep analysis and purposeful thematic connections to the thesis. I decided that the work was so well developed from its original craft, and after meeting with the student to confirm his meetings with the academic coach, I would give him an A. He was elated after receiving his grade and said that all of the extra hours reworking the paper were worth it. In the end, his grade in the class went up, as well as his confidence. Without the mastery system, I believe both would have gone down.

Maura

Maura was a first-year teacher and member of Aubrey's PLC. She, too, had anticipated that students would complain about this unfamiliar strategy, but she found mostly positive reactions from her classes. She writes:

At the onset of the decision, I was very receptive to the idea of mastery grading given the written products received from my sophomores at the beginning of the school year. However, as this mastery-based assignment was announced during the first semester of my first year of teaching, I was very wary as to how my students would receive this

assignment. Would they appreciate the ability to revise and receive a better score than before? Would I be met with animosity and resilience to more work? Would I be able to meet the demands of being a first year teacher and those required of mastery grading? Questions such as these permeated my thoughts, especially since this assignment would not only challenge my students, but it would also question and reshape the way I approached the timeliness of my grading and the depth, clarity of my essay feedback, and the true value of the revision process.

Upon announcement, there was, in fact, some grumbling (as expected in high school), but once students were given the opportunity to revise their essays as many times as needed, attitudes changed and most (41 out of 46 total students) were able to achieve the benchmark level of an 85% or higher. Comments transformed within the revision period from "Are you serious? We have to work more for this essay?" to "I know I reached mastery on this draft, but I would like to try for a strong A, if not a 100%. Am I able to revise and resubmit?" Students truly began to see writing as process, one that encouraged them to grow academically and personally, rather than a workload that just happened to come at the conclusion of a unit.

This opportunity to revise the original essay greatly encouraged the more "on the cusp" students – those who either tended to do flirt with the B+/A- range or completed the "minimum" in order to just get by – to truly develop and shine in their abilities. One of these students in particular did not turn in the initial mastery essay until, per our school's academic policy, the highest score he could reach was a 50% on the assignment. When I finally did receive his essay, it showed great depth in his comparison, ideas, and logic that would have passed mastery if not for the school-mandated penalty. While the school's academic policy did hinder this student from receiving an initial grade that reflected his true abilities, I carefully considered my own teaching philosophy regarding grading (Should I allow a revision and deduct points or allow for a new opportunity for the grade to reflect student ability?) and conversed with my department chair. From this reflection, I pulled this student aside and explained that if he used my comments as a guide, edited the areas needing improvement within his essay, and resubmitted his new copy within a week, I would wipe the "grade slate" clean and not apply the late penalty to the new essay. He agreed, and for one of the first times that semester, this student completed his essay on time. Additionally, he presented

such well-developed and coherent ideas within his writing that he exceeded his first draft, initial mastery grade, his own expectations, and mine, too. Receiving a written product and score such as this without mastery may not have happened if it wasn't for the encouragement of a growth-mindset for both student and teacher alike.

Moving Forward

Throughout this process, we saw strong evidence of writer's agency. From struggling writers to over-achieving hard workers, the process forced students to own their writing in ways that we simply do not see in traditional grading. A consistent thread in our stories is that students had control over the process; the grading system was leveraged to manipulate those choices, but the evidence suggests that students saw this as an opportunity to grow as writers.

Implementing this approach to grading was challenging. We faced pressure from administration that challenged our efforts. As a department, we could not force change in school-wide academic policies, but we learned to work within that system to meet our instructional goals and improve student achievement. We were constantly in conversation with administration, parents and students so that our expectations were clear. As department chair and literacy coach, Beth led those efforts and was able to ensure that our approach was consistent across levels, a very important aspect to our success. While the tension was real, the goal of an English teacher should never be to place a red lettered grade at the top of a paper and set it in stone. There should never be a "call it a day" attitude, or a "last chance" mentality to determining the progress of young writers. If the writing process is fluid and ever-changing, so should our thoughts be about students' growth and abilities in our classroom. If students are given the opportunity to reach beyond their first attempt, teachers will discover more effort, creativity, and critical thinking.

After entering into mastery grading with initial trepidation, we found our successes helped us to see that the benefits outweighed the risks. Beth worked closely with one student who admitted when he finally passed mastery after nearly an entire semester that he had never before been asked to work so hard on his writing. "I didn't know I could do this," he told her. Because of successes like this, we have committed to incorporating this system into different grade levels and possibly, through collaboration with peers, into other content areas. As different stakeholders become familiar with the process, we believe the anxiety that naturally comes with the unfamiliar will subside. In the end, our results spoke for themselves, and members of administration supported our efforts. The progress we made this year has convinced all of us of the very real value of mastery grading despite the challenges it may create.

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