

TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

The 3P Grading System

*An Easier, Faster, Better Way to
Evaluate Students and Their Work*

by
Steve Peha



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The 3P System

A Better, Faster, Easier Way to Grade

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By Steve Peha



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Introduction

For most teachers, grading is a necessary evil. Necessary because it's required in most school districts; evil because it's so time consuming and so often filled with tension and regret. But evaluation is a vital part of teaching and learning. And letter grades are an enduring aspect of our culture. Despite rapid change in education, it's unlikely grading will ever go away.

Over the course of a 30-year career, a high school teacher may have to deal with the challenge of determining a student's final semester grade as many as 10,000 times. That's great incentive to make the process of grading worthwhile. But most of us are familiar with only one approach: the traditional Point-Percentage Method. How do we do something differently if we don't know a different way to do it?

That's where the 3P System comes in.

The 3P System is a different way to grade. Of course, merely the fact that it's different is enough to make most teachers not want to do it. Grading is so fraught with problems now, why would anyone want to experiment with something new they've never heard of?

Because it's better, faster, and easier.

The 3Ps in Action

It's Monday morning, first day of the last week of the quarter. Grades are due Friday afternoon.

Last Friday, students went through their notebooks and put their collections together. You could call them portfolios but I don't. They're just collections of the required work I've assigned in the first eight weeks of class — the equivalent of a project you or I might turn in on the job.

For this first quarter, each student assembled the following: a personal narrative essay, a persuasive essay, a book review, and at least one other published piece of their choice. They also included their reading log, showing at least three novels completed, and their response journal.

Reflections

Today, the kids are working on their reflections. This is a written self-assessment of their accomplishments to date based on three traits: participation, progress, and performance. For each trait, I've asked them to give me the letter grade they think they deserve according to this scale:

- "A" means "Above and beyond".
- "B" means "Basically fine".
- "C" means "Could've done better".
- "D" means "Didn't try."
- "F" means "Forget about it!"

(If we had an "E" it would mean "Excuses, excuses!")

I call this the "Real World Grading Scale". It's how most of us look at grades in the world of work. Over the last 20-30 years, it seems like we've

seen some grade inflation in the United States. So I like to make sure kids measure themselves against a relevant real world standard.

To get them calibrated, I point out that most of us are "B" and "C" performers in most of the things we do. Most employees are "B" and "C" workers. Most of us attain "B"- and "C"-level skills in our favorite hobbies. A grade of "A" is reserved for excellence "above and beyond" the norm.

I also ask students to write brief explanations of why they deserve the grade they've given themselves. In each of their three reflections, they'll need to refer to classroom criteria and to examples of work from their collections.

Criteria

At the beginning of the quarter, we took time to go over our criteria. We started with criteria for participation:

- Follow directions the first time they are given.
- Come to class every day; don't be late!
- Share regularly. Give good feedback. Ask good questions.
- Take ownership of your results; be accountable; don't blame.
- Ask for help when you need it; use the advice I give you.

To me, participation is the most important thing. That's why it gets the highest weight. Participation counts for 50% of the total grade, progress counts for 30%, performance for 20%. Other weightings are possible but this one has worked out best for me because it encourages students to be engaged in class and to work hard all the time.

Earlier in the quarter, we also talked about my expectations for their progress based on what I had planned to cover. And, finally, we discussed appropriate levels of performance by looking at samples of successful student work and comparing that work to our own.

Many kids will finish their reflections in one period; some will need two. During this time, I'll have conferences. Mostly I'll be reminding kids of what we've already gone over with regard to our criteria and reminding students to refer to their collections, their journal records, and other sources of evidence they've accumulated to document their grades. We'll also do some sharing so we can talk about effective ways to write reflections.

Conferences

On Tuesday, I begin grading conferences with those who finish their reflections early. Conference time lasts three days which gives me about five minutes per student. As kids finish their self-assessments, I call them up one at a time. They know their self-assessment counts for half their grade so they take this process seriously.

They start by telling me the grade they think they deserve for participation and we talk about it briefly using their reflection as a guide. When we're both satisfied that their self-assessment is accurate, I give them my grade. We repeat this process for progress and performance. And then we're done.

As I finish each conference, I enter grades into my grading program. To calculate the final result, their grade is averaged with mine and the weighting percentages are applied.

When the last conference is finished on Thursday, I'll be finished, too — with no time spent after school, no time spent grading papers at home, and no time spent explaining grades and grading procedures to disgruntled students.

On Friday, I'll ask the kids to review their collections, their reflections, and their final grades. If anybody wants to talk with me about anything,

this is the day to do it. And then I'll ask everyone to write me a brief statement listing three or four goals they would like to strive for in the coming quarter. The list of goals from each class will help me plan my lessons for the coming term.

Wrapping Up

The key to whole thing as far as I'm concerned is that the kids do most of the work. The effort they put in to assess themselves pays off big time in better behavior, increased independence, and a more goal-oriented attitude toward school. I think they also like the control they have over their own results. Their self-assessment accounts for half their grade; it probably means more to them than my assessment does. This is exactly the way it should be. I want highly engaged, independent learners in my classroom — kids who are intrinsically motivated to achieve. The 3P System is the only approach to grading I've found that supports these values.

While I know that the time we've taken to go over our grades has been time well spent, I also know that I don't want to take this long to do it next time. Fortunately, I won't have to. Next quarter, I'll probably be able to assign the reflections as homework. By second semester, the entire 3P grading process can probably happen "behind the scenes" of our regular classroom work; I might not even need to do grading conferences with most of the kids.

Each time we go through the process, everything gets faster, easier, and better. Kids who've done it for more than a year begin to think in terms of the 3Ps all the time. And because the system, the procedures, and the grading calculations are always the same, once kids get it in their heads, it doesn't need to be re-taught.

In my early years of having to give kids grades, I always struggled with how to do it well. But no matter how many different ways I tried it, nothing ever changed. At the end of the grading period, I still had kids who

were unhappy and grades I couldn't justify. I often found myself revising grades upward just so everyone would feel better and I'd have fewer problems. I know this contributed significantly to my own problems with grade inflation. I knew I wasn't grading effectively, and because of this I tended to give kids higher grades than they deserved. As a result, I undermined my ability to ask more of my students.

But with the 3P System, kids ask more of themselves. Rather than a benevolent dictator doling out rewards and the occasional punishment, I now feel like a responsible authority guiding kids to more accurate perceptions of abilities. I also feel I'm preparing kids better for their lives outside of school because the 3P System is so similar to the way people are evaluated on the job.

Perhaps the best part of all is how much time I save. I don't take papers home to correct them. I don't record a bunch of data in a grade book. I don't accept late work or let kids do extra credit. And if parents get upset, I just tell them to come in, look at their child's collection of work, and determine their own grade based on the same criteria. Then I average that in with the student's grade and my own. It's a fair, flexible, and conflict-free way of resolving problems — an approach that turns a patently adversarial situation into a cooperative process where everyone can feel that their voice is being heard.

When I think about how much energy and anguish we put into grades and report cards, and how the practices of traditional grading only seem to make things worse, I'm excited about the possibilities for the 3P System. It's helpful even when one teacher in a building uses it. But I wonder how much more powerful it might be if everyone gave it a try.

The 3P Grading System: Step By Step

One of the best things about the 3P System is its flexibility. It can be modified and adapted to meet the needs of virtually every teacher in every classroom situation. You can change the weighting factors, the grading scale, the criteria, the length of the grading period, the work you ask students to collect — just about anything you need to modify can be modified.

We encourage teachers to take the concepts and the basic philosophy and make the system their own using the following process as a guide:

Step 1 The teacher defines expectations for participation, progress, and performance, and gives each trait a percentage weight.

The recommended weights are 50% for participation, 30% for progress, and 20% for performance. For participation, you can use a simple set of classroom rules or behavior expectations. For progress, describe for students your expectations of the new skills and information they should master. For performance, show students models of successful work.

Step 2 Students collect relevant work during the grading period.

Assign work as you normally would but think ahead to determine the type and number of assignments students must include in their collections at the end of the grading period. You may also ask kids to include other types of "artifacts" like notes, journal entries, logs, drafts, anything that might be relevant to documenting their learning.

Step 3 Students assess themselves by completing a written reflection and giving themselves a letter grade for participation, progress, and performance.

The reflections should be brief but include enough information for students to explain why

they graded themselves the way they did. Encourage students to refer directly to the work in their collections and their past participation in class as evidence of their learning.

Step 4 The teacher reviews collections, reflections, and student-supplied grades. Ideally, this happens in a brief teacher-student conference but grading conferences are not required. The teacher may also ask the student to review their assessment and their reflections if the grades given seem wildly inaccurate.

Step 5 The teacher assigns a grade for participation, progress, and performance. Based on the collection, the reflection, and any other relevant information, the teacher gives the student a set of letter grades on the same three traits to match the grades students gave themselves.

Step 6 The final grade is calculated. Student and teacher grades are averaged, the average is multiplied by the weight for each trait, and the trait scores are added together to get a final grade.

Using the traditional 4-point scale ("A" = 4.0, "A-" = 3.67, "B+" = 3.33, "B" = "3.0", etc.), here's how one student's grade would be calculated:

	Participation (50%)	Progress (30%)	Performance (20%)
Student Grade	A- (3.67)	B- (2.67)	B+ (3.33)
Teacher Grade	B (3.0)	B+ (3.33)	B (3.0)
Average	$(3.67 + 3.0) \div 2 = 3.34$	$(2.67 + 3.33) \div 2 = 3.0$	$(3.33 + 3.0) \div 2 = 3.17$
Multiply by Weight	$3.34 \times .5 = 1.67$	$3.0 \times .3 = .9$	$3.17 \times .2 = .63$
Final Overall Grade	$1.67 + .9 + .63 = 3.2$ (B)		

Following this procedure, grades can be calculated at any point in a grading period. While criteria for progress and performance may be subject

to change as course requirements change, criteria for participation generally remain consistent throughout. As soon as kids know how to assess themselves for the three traits, they can calculate their own grades any time they want.

Other Considerations

Because the process depends so much on students, we have to think carefully about three things:

- **How can we teach them to assess themselves accurately?** At first, most students will have a difficult time assessing themselves with much accuracy. So the key here is to practice informally on a regular basis. Quick oral assessments of participation, progress, or performance, followed by brief discussions of everyone's rationale, can happen at any time.
- **What if they lie or try to deceive us in some way?** Dishonesty is one of the most serious transgressions in any classroom community. So I like to make the stakes for dishonesty very high. I think the Honor System is a great mechanism for discouraging deceit. Any student who is intentionally deceitful with regard to work collected or any other aspect of class conduct will receive a failing grade for current grading period.
- **What if they can't manage a collection or the self-assessment process?** Some students might have difficulty managing a collection of work over several weeks or months. The basic options are to manage it yourself or to make managing the collection, reflection, and self-assessment process part of the basic participation grade. Except in extreme cases, I favor the latter.

Once kids understand it, they take to the 3P System very well. But what about parents, school administrators, and fellow teachers whose only knowledge of grading is based on the Point-Percentage Method?

- **Parents.** Parents seem only to become interested in how a teacher grades when their child receives a grade they don't expect. Obviously, it's good to let parents know your grading approach. Giving them some information from this document might be an easy way to do that. If a parent contacts you to dispute a grade, or to inquire about how a grade was calculated, the 3P System provides all the documentation you need. Just let the parent review their child's collection and the appropriate classroom criteria. After the parent has finished the review, ask mom or dad to grade their child just as you did on participation, progress, and performance. Then average the parent's grade in with yours and the student's. Having a third opinion, based on the same source evidence, actually increases the accuracy of final result.
- **Administrators.** Administrators who have studied contemporary assessment techniques will recognize many positive aspects of what you are doing in the 3P System. More traditional administrators, however, may express concerns. Most of these concerns come from the fact that they don't understand how the system works. Going over the system with them typically solves most problems. Inviting them to your class to watch you teach self-assessment or to sit on a few grading conferences will almost certainly convince them that you're doing something good.
- **Other Teachers.** Teachers who do not like the 3P System will often criticize it as being irresponsible. They think that if half the grade is left up to the student that students will inflate their grades. They also think that if half the grade is given for participation that rigor and performance will suffer. Just the opposite is typically the case. Teachers who teach the self-assessment component effectively, generally find that students are harder on

themselves than we are. As for rigor, setting higher standards for participation allows teachers to ask more of their students in the amount and quality of the work they produce.

Finally, first-time 3P System users often express a fear that if they are not grading every individual assignment, their students will not take their work seriously. Doing away with the grading of individual assignments doesn't mean doing away with evaluation and feedback. It simply means using other, more effective approaches.

Taking student work home and returning it with grades and comments is simply not as valuable as providing feedback through conferencing and teaching students to assess their work through small group and whole class sharing. It's also not a good use of your valuable time and effort. By contrast, conferencing, in-context lessons, reviewing models, and discussing criteria heighten students' awareness of your expectations and provide them with feedback and assistance as they are working which is the time when they can use it most. The research on assessment is clear: learners need feedback. But the research is also clear that giving grades and comments after an assignment is completed are two of the least effective feedback mechanisms we have.

A Real World Model

The traditional Point-Percentage Method of grading has been a part of school as far back as any of us can remember. But where does the 3P System come from?

Ever had a job? I mean a job outside of teaching. Better yet, a job in the private sector, maybe a near-minimum wage job like the kind most of us have when we're just starting out.

My first job was as a dishwasher in a hotel diner. I was 16. Every Saturday and Sunday, from 6AM until 2PM, I kept the dishes clean and the tables cleared at The Little Cheerful Café. I think I got \$40 for the day. Plus breakfast, of course.

While hardly rocket science, the job did require me to learn new things like how to run the dishwasher, how to deal with cranky customers, how to clear tables without dropping plates, how to help the waitresses with side work, etc. And then there were all those unspecified but equally important aspects of my job like showing up on time, working late when necessary, getting along with everyone, treating customers appropriately, respecting certain aspects of the company culture, etc.

So here's a worthwhile question to ponder: If I never received a grade for an assignment, and if I never got a report card, how did I know how I was doing? And how did I learn to get better over time?

On the one hand, that's a silly question, isn't it? Everyone knows how this works. First of all, I was constantly assessing my own results. Were there any tables that needed busing? Were the dishes clean when I took them out of the dishwasher? Was I putting things back where they belonged? Was anybody yelling at me? For the first few weeks, I must have asked myself a hundred questions like these each day — and then asked my co-workers if I didn't know the answer.

My boss was asking questions, too. Was I doing my job the right way? Was I representing the restaurant appropriately? Was I getting along with him and with the other employees? Was I treating customers right? I'll bet my co-workers were asking questions, too.

If I wasn't fulfilling my expectations, did I get a bad grade or a call home to my parents? No, of course not. My boss just took a minute to talk to me in the back. He told me what I was doing wrong and what I needed to know to do it better. Then I went back to work and back into self-assessment mode.

The waitresses helped me out this way, too. As long as they could see that I was trying, they were always willing to help me out with constructive criticism and by answering any questions I had. As a result, I had three good sources of feedback: feedback from myself, feedback from my boss, and feedback from my co-workers. I suppose I even had some feedback from customers, though this wasn't the same kind of direct feedback I was getting from the people I was working with.

This is how good assessment and reporting systems work in the real world: the person being evaluated relies first and foremost on constant self-assessment but also receives additional assessment information from many other people — along with direct assistance to improve the aspects being assessed.

Grading For Humans

Even though the 3P System seems unusual, it's not that different from the way most of us look at our students — when we're not looking through the lens of traditional grading. Something every teacher knows but rarely thinks about is that we regard our students one way when we evaluate them as people and another way when we evaluate them as a series of marks in a grade book.

How's Johnny doing this semester? Right now his grades average out to a 72 so I guess that's a C-minus.

But how's Johnny the Human Being doing? Well, he hasn't missed a day of class in over a month. He's been turning in all of his homework lately. He's not talking out so much; his behavior has really improved. He didn't do too well on our last test but he did score higher than he usually does. I can see he's starting to make more of an effort, his attitude's better, he seems a bit happier, and he's coming to class regularly. I expect him to do better on our next test.

When we look at Johnny through the lens of the traditional Point-Percentage Method, he doesn't look too good. He bombed a bunch of early assignments (probably because he missed a lot of class), and because of the way we average grades, the fact that he seems to have turned things around doesn't count for much. Even if he aces everything from here on out, the best he can probably hope for is a low B. But when we see Johnny as a person, we see more of who he really is and more of who he is becoming.

Ironically, if we didn't have grades for Johnny, we might have a more accurate view of who he is as a learner because we'd be forced into considering the broader human perspective rather than relying on the narrow numerical result that reduces him to a letter or number. And if we viewed him in more human terms, we'd not only know more about him, we might be better able to help him improve.

In our view of Johnny as a human being, we evaluate three things:

- **His Participation:** "He hasn't missed a day of class in over a month. He's been turning in all of his homework lately. He's not talking out so much; his behavior has really improved.... I can see he's starting to make more of an effort...."

- **His Progress:** He's coming to class and turning in his homework more regularly. He scored higher on his test than usual.
- **His Performance.** Johnny still isn't performing at a high level but he's expected to do better in the future.

Participation. Progress. Performance. This gives us a more complete picture of who a student is and how that student is doing in school. If these are the normal things we value as teachers, why shouldn't we use an approach to evaluation that takes these three things into account?

Back to Work at the Diner

Like any teacher who wants his students to master material and develop skills, my boss at the diner was, ultimately, concerned with my performance. He wanted those dishes cleaned thoroughly and efficiently so he could keep the food moving out to his customers.

But that wasn't all he cared about. He was also concerned about the progress I was making. Was I getting better each week? Was I becoming someone he could really count on? Was I ready for new responsibilities? And so on. Even though I didn't have the most important job in the world, he was always interested in my getting better at it and in taking on new tasks as well.

Finally, even if I was the best dishwasher in the world, and even if I was always learning new tricks, he wouldn't have kept me around past the first day if I hadn't participated in the business in an appropriate fashion. I had to show up on time. I had to follow his instructions. I couldn't take breaks whenever I wanted. I had to get along with the other employees. I had to be friendly and upbeat with customers whether I felt that way or not. And so on.

It's also interesting to reflect on the fact that, over the long run, how I participated was probably more important than how quickly I got clean dishes out. Why? Because my boss could always help me learn to clean dishes more effectively. But he probably couldn't ever teach me how to be a more likeable or more responsible person.

My boss — and probably my co-workers, too — were keeping an eye on me. They were evaluating my work by keeping an eye on my participation, my progress, and my performance. And when I slipped up in one area or the other, I got feedback and instruction.

Who Needs Grades?

I didn't need grades or a report card to learn to do my job. And my boss and my co-workers didn't need these things to teach me. What I needed, of course, was many attempts at the same set of tasks, feedback about how I was doing — as I was doing things — and instruction from the people around me about how to do things better. I didn't get a grade for each load of dishes I brought out or each table I cleared. I didn't get a number at the end of the day representing my performance as an average of everything load of dishes I washed or every table I cleared. When I was evaluated, I was evaluated for the totality of my work not a laundry list of individual parts. And when I did get a list it was to help me improve, not to give me a score for how I was doing. There was a list of things I was good at and a list of things I needed to improve. When my boss talked to me about this, his intention was to help me make the second list shorter.

In the world outside of school, we tend to judge the people we interact with regularly on a holistic basis. And when we do break things down, our evaluations often break into three traits: participation, progress, and performance. We've all known co-workers or teammates who we judged as being incredibly talented (performance) but difficult to get along with (participation). We've all known people who, while not particularly talented (performance), worked very hard (participation), and made consis-

tent improvement (progress). Some people get by on hard work alone (participation); they never seem to get better (progress) and they never seem to do anything really great (performance). But because they are so great to work with, our overall judgment of them is positive.

Looking at people in terms of their participation, progress, and performance is a normal, natural thing. We do it all the time at work, on our sports teams, with friends, in our community groups, even in our family. Why not look at kids in school this way, too?

But I Don't Work in a Diner!

Of course, school is not the real world. And because of that, real world rules don't apply. As classroom teachers, we have to give grades. No way around it. But this doesn't mean we can't find a grading system that is as practical and as authentic as possible.

So how can we respect the rules of our schools, the research of education experts, and the logic of real world teaching and learning that we know from our own daily lives? This is where the 3P System comes in.

The 3P System is based on four key ideas:

- **Students are evaluated on participation, progress, and performance.** In order to assess students effectively, and to help them effectively assess themselves, we have to look at each of these three traits — we can't get a whole and truly accurate picture of a student without them. Participation has to do with how students conduct themselves in class. It includes everything from coming to school every day to following directions to turning in assignments on time. Progress is new learning; it's a measure of what students know at the end of a grading period that they did not know at the beginning. Performance refers only to the quality of the work students turn in.

- **Students assess themselves in a way that counts for 50% of their final grade.** In calculating the final grade, a student's evaluation is equal in weight to the teacher's evaluation. This makes self-assessment an integral part of the grading process. It also increases student ownership, heightens accountability, and improves motivation. This is the most powerful aspect of the 3P System because it makes student self-evaluation an ongoing and integral part of class. Students may struggle at first to assess themselves accurately but most make quick improvement because they have a teacher's assessment to compare themselves to. The more accurate kids get, the better they become at directing their own work, correcting their own errors, and setting goals for improvement.
- **Participation is more important than progress or performance.** Participation is the key to maximizing achievement for every student; the harder they try, the higher they fly. Making participation the most heavily weighted trait increases attendance, improves behavior, encourages students to put forth a greater effort, and provides an incentive for students to monitor their own conduct. It also gives teachers a powerful and appropriate tool when intervention is required to resolve longstanding problems.
- **Grades are calculated based on a collection of work over time.** Rather than giving grades to individual assignments and then averaging them, a single grade is given for a grading period based on a collection of work. This encourages learning over the long haul because one bad test or one bad assignment doesn't ruin a student's overall grade. Similarly, cramming and doing well on one test or one project can't dramatically improve a student's grade. (Just as cramming can't dramatically improve a student's learning.) Looking at work over time also allows teachers and students to assess growth and to spot important trends and patterns.

These four ideas are the cornerstones of the 3P System. They are what makes the system unique and uniquely effective. They are also what makes the system different from traditional Point-Percentage Method grading.

Big Change, Big Challenge

Obviously, the 3P System presents a serious challenge to traditional grading practices. But, as many researchers have shown, traditional grading doesn't work very well. Teachers, too, are clear on the problems of traditional grading; few can honestly say that they like it, that it makes them better teachers, or that they think it is a good way to help students learn. When we factor in the amount of time teachers spend administering traditional grading methods, we see the need for a big change in grading practices. And with big change comes big challenge.

Perhaps the most challenging aspects of the 3P System are the ideas of not grading individual assignments and not averaging individual grades to get a final grade. In the 3P System, for example, if we wanted to calculate a mid-quarter grade, we would base our evaluation on all relevant participation, progress, and performance information during that four-and-a-half-week period of time. And we would only consider the time period as a whole, not how well a student may have done on a particular day or week. To get a final grade for the quarter at Week 9, we would again consider the entire period of time — all nine weeks of it. We wouldn't calculate a new grade for the second four-and-a-half weeks and average that grade with the grade for the first four-and-a-half weeks. Similarly, we would not average quarter grades to get a semester grade; we'd look at the entire 18 weeks as a whole.

Why do we do this? How can we avoid grading individual assignments? How can we avoid averaging intermediate grades to get a final grade? Why does everything have to be so holistic? There are two reasons. First of all, averaging makes grading less accurate. If you're interested in the

statistical reasons why we should never average grades, take a look at Robert Marzano's very short book entitled *Transforming Classroom Grading*. But there's an even better reason why we shouldn't average.

How Do You Want to Be Graded?

Think about your own life. As a teacher, you may teach five to six classes a day, 180 days a year. That's about a thousand classes a year. So if your paycheck depended on how well you taught, would you like to be graded on each individual class?

Say you make the average teacher's salary in America which right now is about \$45,000 a year. If you teach 1000 lessons, that's \$45 a shot. But say your actual pay is based on the percentage score you get for each lesson from your evaluator. Get a 90 and you'll only make \$40.50 for your first period class. Have a couple tough kids in second period, get a 60, and you're only making \$27 for that hour. Miss a day altogether and you could be out \$250 or more. And would you like it better if instead of being graded by the lesson, you were graded by the day, by the week, or by the month?

Most of us recognize the need to have our work evaluated. But we also insist that our work be evaluated fairly in ways that take into account the wholeness of our contribution and the circumstances under which that contribution is made. Everybody has bad days. Everybody has good ones, too. Do we want to be averaged? Or do we want our failures and successes to be viewed in a more thoughtful light that reflects more accurately our true abilities and accomplishments?

For example, what if I'm a brand new teacher. I'll probably have a horrible first month of school. But if I work hard, I'll get better every month, and the combination of my fear and my youthful exuberance may make me into something of an over-achiever. By year's end, I might be one of

the best teachers in my building. But if you average my performance, I'll only be average.

No teacher wants to be treated this way. No student does either. And yet, that's exactly what we do when we use the traditional Point-Percentage Method. Instead, we should use an approach to grading that is fast for us, fair for them, and fully able to express the complexity of learning that occurs in our classrooms. We should also use an approach that prepares kids for the kind of evaluation they'll receive in the real world outside of school. The 3P System was created to achieve these goals.

"P" is for "Participation"

Participation is the most important aspect of a child's learning life in school. Students who participate more effectively, learn more effectively. Students who are more engaged are also easier and more rewarding to teach. These students also contribute positively to the learning experiences of others. So helping students assess and improve their participation promises a triple payoff.

Participation, or effort as many people think of it, is also highly valued in our culture. In life we can't always determine our results. But we can always determine our effort. And most coaches, music teachers, doctors, and psychologists will tell you that effort is often the determining factor in how well human beings perform over long periods of time — especially in situations that are extremely challenging. Parents, too, tell their children to "try their best". So it's important to maintain this cultural consistency in our classrooms by making sure participation is a big part of what we teach and what we measure.

In the philosophy on which the 3P System is based, participation is the most important aspect of how a student interacts in school. Students who fail to participate, fail to learn. They also sap the energies of their teachers and make it difficult for other students to learn as well. Because participation is so important, we give it the most weight in the 3P System.

Personally, I have found that putting a strong emphasis on participation is a key element in my approach to building a strong and supportive classroom community. I can tell kids all day long that I want them to participate. I can punish them when they act out or when they just sit there doing nothing. I can take off points when they miss assignments. But none of that gets the job done. By contrast, showing students with my assessment that their daily participation matters more to me than anything else, yields dramatic and often immediate improvements.

When kids participate well, my teaching is easier and more enjoyable. And when my teaching is easier and more enjoyable, I'm more effective on many different levels. The opposite situation is also true. When kids are not participating well, there's literally nothing I can do until I address participation problems. And even when I address them, I may not succeed in fixing them. I can't force kids to come to class every day. I can't force kids to read or to write or to share. I can't force kids to do their homework. But we can work together to improve participation. And having grading system that values this element is very helpful in this regard.

At least half of the responsibility for participating effectively belongs to the kids themselves. They have to work hard because they choose to work hard. And they have to know what working hard means in the context of my class. That's why, in addition to understanding my criteria and my assessment of their participation, they have to make their own assessment as well.

Participation is the lynchpin of learning and a fundamental aspect of life success. It's hard to imagine kids learning much if they don't put in a strong effort. And it's hard to imagine teaching well in front of a group of kids who won't try. That's why effective participation is a core value of the 3P System.

How Do I Define Participation?

Every teacher can describe in simple language the qualities of students who participate well. Much as we might complain about the tougher kids we have to work with, we always have several each year who remind us, by the quality of their effort and the constancy of their positive attitude, why we became teachers in the first place.

Criteria for participation often look like this:

- Attend class every day.
- Be prepared; have assignments and materials ready.
- Follow directions.
- Turn work in on time.
- Share regularly.
- Raise your hand to talk.
- Be respectful to others.
- Etc.

In the 3P System, each teacher creates his or her own participation criteria based on the elements of participation that are most highly valued. Teachers can even have different criteria for different classes if that seems appropriate.

I used to come up with a new list of participation criteria for every class of kids I worked with. Then I realized that all the lists were basically the same. After several years, I think I've settled on a small set of items that seems to work for me no matter what class I'm in.

The first element on my list is: "Follow directions the first time they are given." I like to point out to the kids that I could actually run the entire class, and assess everything they did, based on this one direction. But that's a bit simplistic. So here's the entire list:

- Follow directions the first time they are given.
- Come to class every day; don't be late!
- Share regularly. Give good feedback. Ask good questions.
- Take ownership of your results; be accountable; don't blame.
- Ask for help when you need it; use the advice I give you.

I love this list. It's short, easy to understand, and I think it covers just about everything I need from kids.

Here's how I explain these participation guidelines to students and how I use them in class:

- **Follow directions the first time they are given.** This is the ultimate guideline because it allows me to make any other guidelines any time I need them. With each different class, different participation problems can arise. So while I need guidelines that are consistent, I need some flexibility, too. The tough part for the kids on this one is the phrase "the first time they are given." They'll follow my directions all the time if I yell them loud enough over and over. But that's not what I want. Too much time — and patience — is wasted when I have to repeat myself like that. Worst of all, I end up sounding like a nag.
- **Come to class every day; don't be late!** Technically, this is built into state laws and district attendance policies. So why do I need this as an explicit guideline? Because state laws and district attendance policies are far too lax to keep kids coming to school enough for them to be successful. I tell kids that missing even one day can jeopardize their participation grade depending on which day it is. This is a judgment call for me based on the individual circumstances of each student's absence. But, in general, it's hard for students to get an "A" in participation if they miss more than two or three classes in a semester. If kids or parents think this is too harsh, I point out the standards for attendance on the job. Most employers will fire employees who miss too much work. All I'm talking about is knocking down one part of a student's grade by one minor grade level during one grading period.
- **Share regularly. Give good feedback. Ask good questions.** Because I teach in the workshop style, it's vital that we have effective communication in the classroom. This is often the guideline kids have the most trouble with. And for kids who are shy, it's especially challenging. But it's also especially important. Students simply can't be in a workshop-style classroom without interacting

with their peers. There are, of course, many different ways for kids to do the things I need them to do. And I'm not at all opposed to giving some kids more time than others to feel comfortable giving things a try.

- **Take ownership of your results; be accountable; don't blame.**

This one is huge. All learners make mistakes. All learners have off days. All learners have poor performances. This is not a problem. But how learners handle these occurrences often is. Whether kids are interacting with me or with their peers, I want them to be fully accountable for their results. When things go well, I want them to take full credit. When things go bad, I want them to take full responsibility — whether the situation is their fault or not. Finding fault and laying blame are two great ways kids have of putting off the responsibility of get something fixed. That's a bad habit to get into and I don't want to support it.

- **Ask for help when you need it; use the advice I give you.** I like to explicitly validate the idea of asking for help. I don't think kids have to know everything — even everything I teach them. What I do think they have to do is find out the things they don't know. And the best way to find out is to ask. Of course, once they ask about something, I expect them to heed my advice. Kids who don't apply the help I give them waste my time and make it harder for me to help others. As a result, students who choose not to use my help get less of it over time. This is only fair as it frees me up to help those who are more likely to benefit from my attention.

My participation guidelines are an expression of some of the deepest values I hold as a teacher. And because participation is part of how I grade, these values are literally part of how I evaluate students.

Every teacher needs to define participation according to his or her own values. The elements I've chosen are things I care about deeply. Each also

has personal significance for me and I often share with kids the details of important life experiences that have shaped my beliefs in this regard. I think this is the key to getting kids to take participation seriously. Kids may not always care about following my rules. But they will almost always respect my values. And when my values around learning become their values around learning, the quality of what we can achieve together improves dramatically.

How Do I Grade Participation?

Participation is as easy to evaluate as it is to define. Looking back over the course of a quarter, for example, every teacher can move quickly down the class list assigning A's, B's, and C's to every student based on how well they conform to the criteria for classroom participation. Students can do this for themselves, too.

There are no set scales or recommended levels of achievement. Just look at your criteria and ask yourself, "How well has this student participated over the entirety of the time period in question?" Grade holistically. Consider all criteria items together. Favor trends and patterns over individual highs and lows.

Many teachers find it helpful to use student models. Think about a student you know well whose participation is exemplary. This is your model of an "A". Now, as you consider each student in your current class, ask yourself, "How does this student compare to that student?" You can also create a model for the lowest grade possible and one for a middle grade as well. With high, medium, and low models in mind, your assignment of new grades is more likely to be fair and consistent.

After grading participation for several years, I've noticed a couple of patterns. First of all, many kids get some form of "B". Why? Well, it's hard to get an "A" in participation if for no other reason than kids are simply allowed by their parents and their schools to miss so many days of class.

High school kids especially have so many things going on. It seems they need to be excused from class once a week for sports or clubs or some appointment. But if few kids get "A's", few also end up lower than a "C". Participation is so important to me that I just don't want to let a kid slide too long if things aren't going well.

One of the most interesting things I've discovered about grading participation is how hard kids are on themselves when they give me their first official self-assessments. During the first few days of class, most students aren't even aware of their participation and they don't seem to think my guidelines are real. So we practice asking ourselves how we're doing and talking about what it means to do well.

Once students understand the expectations, however, they seem to go overboard the other way. When we get to our first official assessment, they consider the criteria and if they've made even a few slight transgressions over a month's time, they whack themselves down to almost nothing. They're also not inclined to remember when they actually participated well.

This tells me that from a kid's point of view, being in class is about being in trouble. And I think this default mindset is probably the root of a lot of poor behavior. Kids — even the "good" ones — think they're behaving badly just because they're not behaving perfectly. By asking students to take occasional informal self-assessments, I can help them see that most of the time most of them are doing pretty well. For kids who've had a lot of trouble in school, this can be an important realization.

Out of our discussions about participation and our informal assessments come little goals for improvement. This is the best part of the 3P System as far as I'm concerned. Kids who haven't been coming to class make commitments to attend regularly. Kids who talk out a lot make commitments to raise their hands. Kids who don't share make commitments to start sharing. This is how the 3P System helps kids make gains: the re-

sults of an assessment can be used immediately — by both teacher and student — to improve learning.

How Do I Keep Track of Participation?

If you know your students well, and if you teach in a contemporary style that favors active student engagement over listening to lectures, you'll probably be able to evaluate participation without needing any records. But if you have a very large class, or your teaching style is more traditional, you may find it helpful to keep some simple records.

Of course, every teachers has the most important participation record of all in his or her attendance data. Let's face it, if you don't come to school, or if you're late all the time, none of the other participation criteria really matter. Near-perfect attendance is a minimum requirement for even passing the class — regardless of the work a student turns in.

Why the big emphasis on attendance? Because if we allow students to receive high grades — or even passing grades — without attending school every day, we are sending a very dangerous message: showing up at school doesn't matter. Why should kids bother to come regularly at all if it doesn't count for something? Why couldn't kids just sit at home and send their work in by e-mail?

Taking a hard line on attendance is also crucial for establishing good work habits. On the job, employers are clear: the most common reason for firing an employee is poor attendance. We even have an old adage in our culture that speaks to this simple truth: "Ninety percent of life is showing up." And while I'm not quite ready to say that attendance should count for 90% of a student's grade, I do think it is vital that our grading model speak to just how important attendance is.

In addition to daily attendance data, most teachers who keep participation records in the 3P System take a simple check-plus-minus approach.

At the end of each class period, they go down the class list and quickly mark a student's participation with a check for average participation, a plus for excellent participation, or a minus for poor participation.

But you don't have to record participation every day. You can do it once a week or at any other reasonable interval. You don't even have to do it regularly. Another way to save time is simply not to mark the "average" scores. Most kids on most days will have average participation. Just leave those blank and make marks only for those kids who participate extremely well or extremely poorly. Finally, there's nothing wrong with asking the kids to keep the records for themselves. They can make check, plus, and minus markings just as easily as you can. They can also turn those marks in at the end of a grading period along with a log or journal, for example.

When it comes time to decide on a participation grade, there's no adding up and averaging of marks to be done. This is just a way for you to record patterns of participation. Regardless of the data you record, you will make the evaluation at the end of the grading period on a holistic basis over the entire span of time. Your judgment — and not a rule, rubric, or mathematical calculation — will determine the final grade.

Something I have realized is that trends are more important than averages. If a student is participating poorly during the first month of a term but makes steady progress and demonstrates exemplary participation during the last month, should I give him a "C"? Probably not. Of course, I'm not going to give him an "A" either. But I am going to respect the positive trend and grade him more like the student he is at the end than the student he was at the beginning.

With regard to the frequency of record keeping, I have found that the more I used the 3P System, and the more I talk with the kids about improving participation, the less any of us need to keep daily records. Weekly records are probably accurate enough anyway. With 90 days in a

semester, it's not likely that any kid's participation on a single day is going to raise or lower a grade significantly.

One of the most valuable ways to take participation marks is to take them on an intentionally irregular basis. So how do I decide when to take them? Whenever I want the kids to be more aware of how they are participating. And when is that? When they are participating extremely well or extremely poorly. So, I might ask kids to note their participation in a journal with the date on randomly selected days when I think they need to pay more attention to it. I have also let kids tell me on which days they would like to be evaluated for participation. This is great because it encourages them to exert more control over their own behavior and self-assessment.

"P" is for "Progress"

In one sense, progress is simply learning. We hope whenever we start a class that by the end each student knows and can do more than when we began. This doesn't always happen, of course, but it's certainly what we strive for.

Students can make progress in a variety of ways; it's up to you, along with their input, to decide what kinds of progress matter most. This may vary from student to student. For example, in a reading class, some kids may make great progress in fluency while others make progress in writing about what they read. Still others may make progress by increasing their reading level. Each of these forms of progress might be equally valuable to the kid making them.

Typically, we look for progress in three places:

- **Improvements in participation.** It's very easy for kids to participate more effectively at the end of a grading period than at the beginning. In fact, this is a normal occurrence since most kids don't understand procedures or expectations at the beginning of the year. Because participation is the most important component of success, it's legitimate to credit students for making gains in this area, especially if those gains have been dramatic and have contributed directly to their learning in other areas.
- **Improvements in performance.** We all hope, of course, that the work kids turn in at the end of a grading period is better than what they turned in at the beginning. But this isn't always the case. Sometimes kids don't improve. And sometimes their lack of improvement is an unintended consequence of our planning or instruction. For example, we may not offer them enough opportunities to show before-and-after results. One of the ways I offer kids enough chances to show improvement is by assigning them a

large number of small tasks that show similar skills. With shorter books to read and shorter pieces to write, kids finish more things and have more examples for comparison.

- **The setting and achieving of specific goals.** Goal setting is another way of looking at progress. After looking at student work during the first week or so of class, we might have a few goals for everyone. And after getting to know our students, we might have two or three individual goals for each kid. Our progress assessment for the entire grading period could be based simply on whether or not students achieved these goals. Personally, I love goal setting. I think it's the most effective way for kids to take ownership of their learning and for me to communicate to them what matters most.

The hard part about working with progress is that, traditionally, we're not inclined to look at it in detailed ways on a student-by-student basis. In the traditional teaching model, we progress through the term by progressing through the curriculum. As teachers, we may feel like we're making progress because we're always covering additional information. But our students may not be making progress because they aren't mastering this information to the same degree and at the same rate that we are covering it.

We can't see progress, of course, if we don't measure it over time in some comparative way. Sometimes it's hard to see it even then. The other thing we have to allow for are multiple attempts at the same or similar tasks. I can't assess a student's progress with writing conventions, for example, unless they turn in at least three or four published essays. I can't be sure of gains in a student's reading level if they don't read at least three or four books. And many skills, like improvements in a writer's voice, for example, might require even more samples.

Another thing I have to keep in mind with regard to progress is degree of challenge. Low kids have more of an opportunity to make progress than

high kids so if I want everyone to have an equal opportunity to grow, I have to make sure my instruction is differentiated. Regardless of ability level, each student must be appropriately challenged. This means kids may be working on different assignments and focusing on different issues uniquely suited to their different needs as learners.

How Do I Define Progress?

The simplest way to define progress is to ask the question, "What has this student learned?" Any learning that has occurred during the grading period is progress made. Of course, to assess this accurately, we have to understand the difference between learning and knowledge. If students come into the class already knowing how to do the work we assign them, then the fact that they got everything done, and may have even done it well, is no indication they've learned anything new.

As with participation, the teacher determines what constitutes valid learning. If we're inclined to follow state guidelines, we can use our standards as the yardstick. In this case, the question we ask becomes, "What has this student learned relative to this learning standard?" or "Has this student exceeded the minimum required by our state in this area?"

If we choose to measure learning solely by state standards, we have to acknowledge that few states, if any, have standards for participation. Most standards are performance standards only. This means that how a student improves in participation over time may not be allowed to influence their final grade. This is unfortunate because it tells kids that how they act is not important in school. It is, however, a reality in some schools and districts that have taken very literal approaches to standards-based education.

My preferred approach to defining progress is to consider all forms possible, especially progress in participation. A writer who would not share at the beginning of a term might have made great strides by learning to

share and take feedback by the end. This could be the most valuable learning this student accomplishes in a given period of time. So even though it might not be related to a state performance standard, I'd hate to have to tell the student that it doesn't matter — especially when I know how much it does.

Technically, as I mentioned above, standards-based assessments do not recognize progress. If a student meets a standard, no further progress is needed. If a student does not meet a standard, it doesn't matter how far below that standard they are. Standards-based assessment emphasizes knowledge and the view that students either have it or not at the time an assessment is given.

By contrast, the 3P System emphasizes learning and recognizes that it is a continuous process that unfolds over time. Regardless of what students have learned in the past, they can always learn more. And whenever they make progress, they can be recognized for it.

The 3P System also recognizes that learning comes in many forms. Who decides what constitutes valid learning and appropriate progress? The teacher. Official curriculum standards may be one of the forms a teacher considers but other forms of learning can be included as well. This is what I like best about the 3P System. It is flexible enough to include any required form of learning while at the same time it allows teachers to include other forms that are meaningful to them and relevant to their students.

Psychologically, what most of us want to know when we're learning something over a long period of time is whether or not we're getting better. At a given moment, we might not need to reach a given level of achievement. But we'd like to know that we're better in February than we were in January. Why? Because it means we're learning — and that we're likely to keep learning into March, April, and May. Sometimes, especially if our ability levels are low and our work is extremely challenging, the only thing that keeps us going is knowing that we are making progress.

Because of the huge psychological value of seeing progress, I like to make sure kids are aware of the gains they've made even when they haven't gained enough to please their state officials. Not meeting a standard yet? That's OK. You're closer to it than you were a while ago. Keep going. You'll get there. Sometimes this is all our lowest kids have to keep them coming to school.

I also want to be aware if kids are moving in the other direction. A fascinating thing most of us never consider is that many kids, especially at the middle and high school levels, get worse the more we teach them. Obviously, I want to keep a close eye on this and intervene aggressively as soon as I notice it. The most important rule of teaching should be the same one doctors have: First, do no harm. If kids are getting worse as they sit in our classes, changes are in order for both student and teacher.

How Do I Grade Progress?

Grading progress can seem extremely challenging at first. For one thing, we don't know a lot about how much kids should grow in a given subject over a given period of time. For example, how much is a 7th grader supposed to progress in one year of Social Studies?

Outside of the research we have on literacy development in primary age students, very little developmental data on human learning exists. Even our math curriculum, which is probably the most sequentially designed of all subjects, is not based on solidly researched developmental information. And when we get up into high school, everyone's just guessing.

We could judge progress by our required curriculum. If students learned everything we taught, we'd regard them as progressing appropriately. But this is silly because our curriculum is selected to meet cultural standards and not for its adherence to standards of human development: units are selected by tradition, the scope of study is arbitrarily determined, and

material is often sequenced in ways that are more consistent with a publisher's product line than with a student's mind.

So if we want to evaluate progress, we have to evaluate it on our own terms. We have to ask ourselves, "How much can students like mine learn in the time that I have to work with them?" And this is where our expectations come into play.

If I'm a talented teacher who has gotten great results in the past, my expectations for students are likely to be high. But if I'm a teacher who teaches poorly, my past results have probably been poor, too. My expectations, therefore, of what my students can achieve are likely to be low. So if I want to get the best sense of what kids can learn, I might need to talk to the best teachers about it. Unfortunately, this may not be possible. And even if I was able to talk with talented teachers about their expectations and results, I might need to change my teaching to match their superior practice so my kids have the same opportunity to make good gains. But none of this is going to happen overnight and we need a way of grading progress right now.

The best approach, therefore, is to grade the progress of each student relative to other students just as we did with participation. Think about kids you've worked with whose progress you have admired. Start with an image of a student who really learned a lot, and set your "A" there. At the low end, it's always easy to find kids who didn't learn much of anything. And it should be easy to find students who sit in between. Then, with models in mind, evaluate your current group relative to those norms.

Another way of approaching the assessment of progress is far more subjective but, in fact, it seems to me more accurate and appropriate. When I ask myself if I'm pleased with a student's progress, I find myself making a list of all the things I think they've learned. If the list is long and filled with substantive accomplishments, I feel like that student has learned a lot. If I can't come up with much, I feel like that student has learned very little. Students who have learned a lot get "A's" for progress. Students

who have learned very little — but still something — get "C's" and "D's". Students who've failed to show any learning, of course, get a failing grade for progress.

Is this approach highly subjective? Yes, it certainly is. But, at least in my case, I've found it to be accurate relative to the student's perceptions of themselves. So at least we can come to reasonable agreements within our class about what good progress looks like.

Regardless of the approach I choose, I have to rate the amount of progress each student has made relative to the opportunities I've given them. Sometimes this means I can't really rate it at all simply because not enough time has passed. Sometimes, if I have to give a mid-quarter first quarter grade (just four-and-a-half weeks into the school year), I feel like the best thing to do is to drop progress from the calculation by setting its weight to 0% and adding an extra 15% each onto participation and performance.

How Do I Keep Track of Progress?

Progress is easy to keep track of because it doesn't have to be tracked. You're looking at a collection of work that has been created over the time of your grading period. Take a look at work that was done early in the period and compare it to work that was done near the end. What differences do you notice? Think also about the student's participation. In what ways has it improved or declined? Here you might need to take a look at other records.

When it comes to progress, a student's work, stored in a notebook or portfolio, is the record itself. By looking at the differences between early work and later work, we should be able to determine what, if any, progress has occurred. Unless, that is, we haven't asked the kids to do enough work in the first place.

This is an interesting problem, especially for secondary teachers who often teach long units with large culminating projects. This problem is even worse if your main method of assessing student learning is the traditional unit test. In this case, over a quarter's time, you might have only two or three tests. And you won't be able to compare them directly because they cover different units of study.

It's hard to see progress in student learning through unit tests. Project work is a little easier to deal with. But, again, unless there are several projects to consider, and an overlap of similar skills across them, direct comparisons for the purpose of assessing progress will be difficult. So if you find yourself in this situation, the best solution once again might be to throw progress out by giving it a weight of 0% and splitting the amount you originally allotted between participation and performance.

Finally, the key to measuring progress accurately is having appropriate artifacts to measure. In a Writer's Workshop, for example, I'll ask for as many as 10 pieces over a semester (a student's final collection will probably only have five or six, however). In a Reader's Workshop, I'll want students to read 10 novels, to give several book talks, and to write several book reviews. These are all small assignments. But it's much better for me to assign many small things than it is to hope that I can learn enough about how students are doing from one or two large things.

"P" is for "Performance"

Performance refers to the quality of student work: how well they do on tests, papers, projects, homework, and any other tasks we assign. Performance is usually the easiest of the 3Ps to assess because it's the one we're most familiar with. Even if we've only been teaching for a very short time, we all know the difference between good work and bad.

These days, performance is what school is all about. Our standards are performance standards. Our high-stakes state tests are performance events. And our college admissions tests, as they have always been, are straight ahead measures of performance with the added bonus that students are performing against each other.

For our purposes in the 3P System, the most important thing to keep in mind is that performance is the simplest of the three traits. We don't have to consider so many "soft" factors as we do with participation. And we don't have to compare examples of work over time as we do with progress. We just have to look at what students have presented in their collections and make a single evaluation about the overall quality of their work during the grading period.

How Do I Define Performance?

If we want to define levels of performance for our students in ways that will help them understand and achieve those levels, we need two things: models and criteria.

If I want kids to write an effective persuasive essay, the first thing I need to do is show them a few effective persuasive essays. Then I need to help them understand what makes these essays effective by using language to describe those aspects of quality that are most important. The combina-

tion of tangible models and understandable criteria gives students a clear target to shoot for. It also helps to define the set of lessons I will teach.

Virtually every teacher who has picked up a piece of chalk since the mid-1990s knows about the importance of using models and criteria. Yet we still face two common problems in the classroom these days when it comes to defining performance for our students: many teachers don't use models or criteria.

Despite the obvious value of using models to show students what we're looking for, most teachers don't actually use them. Sometimes this is because models are not readily available. At other times, there doesn't appear to be any reason at all other than a teacher's lack of interest.

When models aren't handy, we either have to find some or make them ourselves. I'm never sure why the finding part is so hard. If we've ever taught a class and had a kid turn in something good, why not save it and use it as a model later on? And if a particular class is new to us, why not just ask a teacher who's taught it a while for a high quality sample from his or her experience? The range of assignments in American schools today is not vast. Most teachers look at hundreds or even thousands of assignments every year. Identifying the best and saving them isn't that hard.

If for some reason we can't find models, we need to make them ourselves. This isn't as daunting as it seems. We're much faster than the kids and have the added advantage of actually knowing a bit about what we want.

Making our own models has two advantages over using someone else's. Most importantly, while making the model, we learn exactly what needs to be done to be successful. Virtually all my best lessons have come from trying to solve a problem while modeling. There's no better way to know what to teach than to have had to use your own strategies to finish your own assignment.

The second big advantage is psychological: kids love it when their teachers model for them. They love looking at our work, analyzing it, criticizing it, admiring it, respecting it. Kids are natural born imitators. When we create our own models, we give them something and someone to imitate.

The language or criteria we use to describe our models can come from one of two places. Either we can use criteria given to us by someone else or we can make our own. As with models, it's much better to make our own criteria than it is to use someone else's. In fact, the best way to make criteria is with our kids. Show them a model and ask, "What's good about this?" Make lists of what they say. In all likelihood, the lists will have to be edited to be useful. But having the kids involved in the process gives them a stake in the outcome. It increases buy-in. And it virtually guarantees that everyone understands what the criteria mean.

If we use criteria from an outside source, we have to be careful to make sure we understand the language. Words are slippery things and rubrics are not poems to be interpreted as every reader sees fit. Particularly tricky are rubrics from state agencies or other educational authorities. The problem with these "official" rubrics is that they are almost always created by committee. After so many revisions and approvals by so many different people, the language that usually survives is an unintentional pastiche of compromises and concessions more suitable for politicians and their special interests than for teachers and their students.

How Do I Grade Performance?

In some ways, grading performance shouldn't give us any more trouble than grading does now. Why? Because traditional grading is performance grading. Students turn in work, we evaluate the quality, we assign a grade.

While performance grading shouldn't give us much trouble, it does because there are two parts of the 3P System that are different from the traditional approach: we're grading a collection of work not a single assignment and students are grading themselves, too.

Making sure students know how to assess the performance of their work is easy. In fact, we take care of this when show them the model and the criteria as we begin teaching them how to do the assignment. No extra instruction is required. They've seen models; they've seen criteria; they know what good work is. Of course, if we haven't shown them models or given them criteria, we have a problem. But that problem is bigger than our kids not being able to able self-assess. Without models and criteria, they may not have even understood what we wanted them to do in the first place.

Assuming that we're using models and criteria, we have "anchors" to help us find the right scores. An anchor is an assessed model with a score attached to it. If you have an "A" paper in your hand, and you can describe why it's an "A", then you and your students can put another paper right next to it and easily determine whether that paper, too, deserves an "A".

While it would be great to have anchors for every possible grade level or score point, we don't often have this. However, if we have models representing high, medium, and low levels of performance, we can easily find the levels in between.

Over the years, I've gotten to the point where I don't feel I even need high, medium, and low models most of the time. If I have a top quality model, and some language to work with, I can usually explain to kids what mid-level work might look like. As for the lowest level, we always seem to have many examples to choose from right in our own rooms.

With anchors defined by models and criteria, it's not too hard to attach a letter or a number to a piece of student work. But how do we assess a collection? If we averaged the scores of the individual pieces, we'd be

making the same traditional mistake we're trying to avoid by using the 3P System. We have to give a single grade for the collection of work as a whole. And the only way to do that is to use our best judgment.

Is this collection worth an "A"? A "B"? A "C"? What about that one? And the next? Which collections across all my classes are the best? Which are the worst? Which are in between? Of course, the kids have to go through this process, too. They even have to write a reflection justifying their assessment. Then we make our assessment and average the two to come up with the final performance grade. It's a process.

And the process is the point. Rather than jumping to conclusions about things, or letting a mathematical formula tell us what we think, we enter into honest personal consideration. We ask ourselves questions. We make comparisons. And the kids are right there with us. When I've done this, I feel like the kids and I are working on it together. It's not me against them the way it was back in the days of traditional grading. It's all of us working together to establish performance standards that are fair and rigorous.

I often experience the same student psychology with performance assessment that I experience when we're assessing participation. Kids don't want low standards. They really want to work toward levels of performance that are meaningful to them. At first, yes, they just about die when I tell them they need to read a few books and publish some writing every two weeks and read a few books. But once they get into the work, I find that many want to go way beyond those standards. Some classes redefine my own expectations as we move into the second half of the year.

I think this happens because the kids are an equal part of the evaluation process. They have a lot of control over how well they do. And even though this is more control than they've ever had before in school, virtually all of them rise to the challenge. A few don't. But by the end of the semester, they usually come around.

How Do I Keep Track of Performance?

As with progress, performance doesn't need to be tracked. All important work will be in the student's collection. In effect, the students keep track of their own performance. But how do they do that? And what if they lose their work?

Most teachers who use the 3P System, use some kind of notebook approach. At a minimum, students keep one section of their notebook for work in progress and another for finished work. And they hold onto everything until the grading period comes to a close.

Some kids do lose their work. When they do, they have two alternatives: they can redo it or they can fail. Why are these appropriate consequences? Because they're the exact same consequences you or I would face on the job.

But being in school is not the same as being on the job, and this is not the cold cruel world, so we try to do a few things to help kids keep track of their work.

Some teachers offer kids a place where they can keep their notebooks in the classroom. This is the best solution. If notebooks never leave the room, notebooks are highly unlikely to get lost. Other teachers encourage their students to make copies of final work. But no matter what precautions we take, kids can still lose work, so periodically we have to do a notebook check up.

Say I've required four pieces of writing for the quarter. If we're doing a notebook check up half way through, I'm going to have kids show me that they've got two pieces in their "finished work" section — or that they're darn close. I'm also going to ask them to go through their notebooks to remove unwanted papers and put everything they need to save exactly where it should be. By doing occasional notebook check ups, the

worst that can happen is that a kid will misplace something and probably be able to find it by the end of class.

Giving the kids responsibility for keeping track of their work is another wonderful aspect of the 3P System. It's wonderful because it means I don't have to do it. And it's wonderful because of what it does for them. By the end of the year, they love their notebooks; they care about their notebooks; they protect their notebooks. And this feeling transfers to how they feel about the work inside — as well as how they feel inside themselves.

The Real World Grading Scale

Back in the good old days, an "A" was an "A", right? And an "A" meant "Excellent". And only a few people got them. And a "B" was "Good". And it was good to be good. And a "C" meant "Average". And, of course, just about everyone was average. No harm in being average, right? Ah, those were the days!

Nostalgia aside, things probably weren't as good as we thought they were back in the good old days. But by most accounts, grading was a bit tougher.

It's impossible to know for sure how different grading standards are now compared to a generation or two ago. But most people think there's been at least some grade inflation. And while we can't say for sure how much, we can try to understand some of the reasons why it might be happening:

- **The fierce competition for college admission.** More than anything else, colleges love to see good grades on the transcripts of their applicants. And more kids are trying to get into college than ever before. At top schools, admission-to-application rates run 10:1 or higher. Even our least exclusive institutions — schools which take students with "C" averages and SAT scores well below the national mean — still reject almost half of the applicants who apply. So, because everyone feels they need higher grades, everyone is getting higher grades. Sometimes kids are actually working harder and learning. And sometimes schools just get used to inching up their marks little by little year after year because that's what their students need to get to the next level.
- **The influence of the self-esteem movement.** In the 1970s, teachers started paying more attention to how their students felt about themselves as people and as learners. Many good things happened because of this. But some bad things happened, too. And one of

those had to do with grades. Over the years, it has become unfashionable for teachers to grade harshly. As a result, cultural pressure now exists to give kids higher grades in an effort to make them feel better about themselves.

- **The tight link between school funding and high school dropout rates.** You don't need a Nobel Prize in Economics to know how tightly school budgets have been squeezed over the last 30 years. Funding is, as always, tied to the number of kids in school. And high school kids who get very low grades tend to drop out. So the economic incentive for some high schools is to lower the number of failing grades. And the best way to do that is to simply give out fewer of them.

So whether or not we think grades are inflated these days, we have to acknowledge that college admissions pressure could be pushing grades up at the top end of the scale; tight funding and the dropout rate could be pushing up grades at the bottom of the scale; the self-esteem movement could be pushing grades up through the middle — and nothing that we know of is pushing grades down. In a situation like this, none of us can argue that we are totally immune to inflating grades, even if we're not aware of doing it. Those who've taught for a generation probably know best how their grading has changed. But even those of us with less experience understand the pressure we feel to make sure our students have good report cards.

The first few times I had to give grades, I didn't know what to do. When I worked with high school kids, I certainly felt all that college admission pressure. A low grade could keep a kid from getting into school and realizing a dream. When I worked with elementary schoolers, the self-esteem thing popped up. A low grade could hurt a kid's feelings. And as I started talking with more administrators at the district level, I learned about the pressures they were under to help keep kids in school. Grade inflation, if it exists, is certainly a natural consequence of other larger factors.

My experiences with grading were very interesting but none of them made me better at grading. The only thing I noticed was that each year I was grading a little easier and getting a little less out of kids. So I decided I needed to recalibrate.

To do that, I asked myself, "How do we grade people in real world outside of school?"

By and large, we don't give people grades in the real world. But psychologically, I realized that we do. The traditional "A"-is-for-"Excellent" scale still applies. Ask anyone in any work group to grade his or her fellow employees. They can do it. And they can give you good reasons, too. In fact, most studies I've read about this suggest that a person's co-workers, when their assessments are taken together, offer a more accurate view of a person's job performance than the person himself or his boss. And when most groups of people rate others in their group, the number of "A's" is very small, much like it used to be in the terrible days of curve grading.

So even if we don't give grades and report cards in the world of work, the psychology of letter grading is alive and well. Why not help kids understand how this works before they get there?

What Should an "A" Mean?

The problem in school today is that "A" no longer means "Excellent", "B" no longer means "Good", and "C" certainly doesn't mean anything even close to "Average". The meanings of the letters have changed. And with that, so has much of their value as tools for understanding how well we're all doing. At one point in my career, I felt completely hemmed in by this. I knew kids weren't doing "excellent" or even "good" work. But giving them "C-s" and "D-s" was definitely out of the question. So I decided to redefine the scale.

To do this, I had to come up with new language for what each grade might mean to a student who was getting it. I played around with different words and phrases and finally settled on this:

- "A" means "Above and beyond"
- "B" means "Basically fine"
- "C" means "Could've done better"
- "D" means "Didn't try"
- "E" means "Excuses, excuses"
- "F" means "Forget about it"

Of course, by now I'm rather attached to this list. You might end up making your own, too. Over the years that I've used the 3P System, I've tired to find just the right bits of language to describe how we look at ourselves in the world of work relative to the traditional grading scale we knew from school. Here's how my thinking goes:

- **"A" means "Above and beyond".** If I do everything my boss tells me, but only that, am I entitled to the highest reward? Not usually. Promotions, raises, bonuses, and other special dispensations are typically reserved for those who go beyond the call of duty. To be an "A" worker, you need to really single yourself out. You have to do more than you're expected to do. You have to be one of the very best.
- **"B" means "Basically fine".** If I'm able to do everything my job requires of me, I'm quite likely to be regarded as an important member of the organization. And even though I may not get that promotion and a seat in the corner office, I'll always have a job because I'm basically fine at what I do. (As a consultant these days, I point out to kids that I consider myself a "B" worker in my own company.)
- **"C" means "Could've done better".** The simple truth of the matter is that "C" workers don't stay working for long. Most of the work-

ers in an organization are "B-s". "C" workers are always in jeopardy of being moved around or thrown out altogether. And, truthfully, most "C" workers could do better; they could become "B-s" if they were more conscientious. Many "B" workers have "C-level" talent but an "A-level" work ethic.

- **"D" means "Didn't try".** If "C" workers struggle, "D" workers probably don't even get hired in the first place. And the difference is probably one of effort. Personally, I've never understood the purpose of the "D" grade. What does it mean? Does "D" stand for "Didn't do anything?" If that's true, why give someone a grade at all? (Unofficially, I tell kids that I will not give "D" grades because I don't know what they mean. I've reinterpreted the "D" with the phrase "Didn't try" to tell kids that I know every one of them can do better than that.)
- **"E" means "Excuses, excuses".** The only way you can get an "E" (which I guess in some schools would be a failing grade) is if you never showed up to class or you didn't turn in your work. And I guess the only thing you'd have to offer by way of explanation would be an excuse.
- **"F" means "Forget about it".** The other type of failing grade. In the type of classes I teach, kids have to work pretty hard to fail. If a kid did fail, I don't think there'd be much point in talking about the reasons why. The kid and I would likely have been through it a dozen times by the end of the term anyway. Better to forget about past performance; just come back next quarter and try again.

As unusual as these definitions are, I've found that kids respond to them almost immediately. They know they can all do better than a "C". They know that if they get a "D" it's because they didn't try. And they know that if they fail there's not much point in talking about why. Better to just get back in the game next quarter and try a little harder this time.

Over the years, I've come to believe that kids in school crave authenticity. I can see it in the way the elementary schoolers light up when they produce their own classroom newspaper. And I can hear it in the "Keep it real!" refrain from the high school kids. For all the fears we have about crushing their egos and damaging their self-esteem, I think dishonesty is more hurtful than anything else. I might not have exactly the right phrases to go with each grade. And I know some people will object to my "school is work" metaphor. But I definitely think we need new ways of communicating with kids about their academic performance. And I think we'll all be better off if the language we use in school prepares kids for what they'll face in life outside of it.

The Real World Grading Scale is definitely tougher than the prevailing grading scales I experience in the schools where I work. So you might think kids would be upset at having to work harder just to get the same result. But they don't. I'm not exactly sure why. But I think it's because these grades actually mean something to them. I think, too, that kids like bumping up against real world standards (even crudely conceived ones). Sure, they're just kids. And I'm in no rush to toss them out into the cold cruel world. But I think it's good to bring a little of the real world in when we can.

TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE

Learning Patterns

Teach Smarter Not Harder

Imagine a structure 13 years tall, 180 days wide, and five subjects deep. This is a K-12 education. Each cell in this structure represents a single class period in a single subject for a total of 11,700 educational opportunities.

By using *Teaching That Makes Sense® Learning Patterns™* we can reduce this academic load for students, simplify planning and instruction for teachers, and help more kids learn more things in less time and with less teacher effort.

Learning Patterns are cross-curricular tools optimized for successful teaching in any subject or grade. They are designed to be used, re-used, and shared across classrooms without requiring extensive training or preparation.

By analyzing standards documents and the methods of effective teachers, *Teaching That Makes Sense* has identified underlying commonalities in learning targets across the curriculum. These commonalities represent dozens of potential assignments that can be taught and learned through a small set of foundational skills.

Consider exposition. Students consume and create expository information in many ways: they read expository texts, write expository essays, create reports, answer test questions, etc. As varied as expository expression is, it has a simple underlying structure that can be explained by a single *Learning Pattern*.

Some *Learning Patterns* cover skills like narration, exposition, and persuasion. Others help teachers and students with things like assessment, reading comprehension, and memorization. The same patterns can be used across grade levels and subject areas as well, so kids take their learning with them as they grow.

For more information about Learning Patterns click here.



“Learning begins with teaching that makes sense.”

Agile Transformation

Building Collective Capacity for School-Wide Change

We are discovering better ways of improving schools by doing it and by helping others do it. Through this work, we have come to value:

- **People.** *Individuals and interactions* over policy and politics;
- **Achievement.** *Maximum potential* over minimum competence;
- **Courage.** *Fierce collaboration* over comfortable compromise;
- **Agility.** *Responding to change* over following a plan.

The items on the right are important, but we value the items on the left more.

Agile Transformation is grounded in two principles: **(1)** People are more successful when they enjoy their work; and **(2)** Schools are more successful when they support people in developing the autonomy, competence, and relatedness that makes their work more enjoyable. Features of *Agile Transformation* include:

- **Paired Practice.** Nobody works alone. Everyone has a team and a teammate.
- **Rapid Iteration.** Sprint through big problems one small problem at a time.
- **Making Sense.** What do we do? Why do we do it? How do we know it works?
- **“Stand Up” Sessions.** What did you do yesterday? What are you doing today? What do you need to be successful? Agile leaders remove impediments.
- **Successful Failure.** Fail fast, fail smart. No blame games. Apply what you learn as you move closer to your goal with each iteration.
- **Souls and Roles.** Aligning what we do with who we are.
- **“Just in Time” Solutions.** Handle problems as they arise. Respond as needed.



“Learning begins with teaching that makes sense.”

Essential Elements of Agile Schools

The Qualities of Effective Educational Communities

1. **Agile schools work because people choose to make them work.** We believe in freedom of choice, and that making the choice to participate fully in teaching, learning, and leading is the most important choice we can make.
2. **Agile schools love to learn.** We believe that learning is inherently enjoyable and that giving learners a responsible degree of autonomy in their individual pursuit of knowledge and skill makes it even more so. Agile educators are learners, too.
3. **Agile schools take a constructive approach to failure.** We believe failure is a normal part of success. Kids struggle to learn. Teachers struggle to teach. Administrators struggle to lead. We all experience failure on the way to solving new problems. The faster we fail, the more solutions we try. The smarter we fail, the more knowledge we bring to the next iteration. Instead of looking back at problems, Agile schools look forward to solving them.
4. **Agile schools are always getting better.** We believe there's almost always a better way of doing something, and that it's almost always worthwhile trying to figure out what that better way is. Agile schools value progress, and the appropriate measurement thereof, because progress is the true indicator of learning.
5. **Agile schools empower people to empower others.** We believe that individuals—not systems or policies—are the true sources of power in our schools. Our responsibility is to use our power in service of the greater good, and to teach students how to use their power that way, too.
6. **Agile schools achieve extraordinary results.** We believe in transformative learning that goes far beyond incremental improvements in test scores. Adults in Agile schools also strive for extraordinary achievement in their profession as well.



“Learning begins with teaching that makes sense.”

Essential Elements

continued...

7. **Agile schools are based on deeply-held beliefs, clearly-articulated values, and a firmly-rooted sense of commitment.** We believe that the most successful schools are those run by people who know what matters most to them and who possess an unshakable determination to get it.
8. **Agile schools are communities where people make a difference and connect with something greater than themselves.** We believe that the drive to contribute is part of human nature. Our role is to guide people in directing their contribution toward its highest and best use.
9. **Agile schools value ownership, positive attitudes, high expectations, and unwavering optimism.** We believe that making a good life is about making good choices, that the pursuit of happiness is an inalienable right, and that self-mastery is the key to its rightful exercise.
10. **Agile schools embrace the risk inherent in the achievement of great things.** We educate for maximum potential not minimum competence. We believe that all learners have within them extraordinary strengths and untapped resources, and that learning is only limited by our willingness to attempt what has never before been attempted. We welcome change, we innovate, and we seek out challenges that organize and measure the best of our energies and skills.
11. **Agile schools affirm self-knowledge as the most valuable knowledge and self-determination as the most basic right.** We believe that introspection, self-disclosure, and intellectual honesty are essential to personal transformation. We seek to support young people in becoming the adults they want to be.
12. **Agile schools are communities where no one is above the rules, everyone has a voice, freedom is sacred, equity and excellence are not mutually exclusive, and the highest goal of education is contributing to the present and future well-being of individuals who can thrive independently in a modern democracy.** Agile schools value college preparation, career fulfillment, and engaged citizenship, but we value something else even more. Collegiate, career, and civic achievement are important, but they are means to ends, not ends in themselves. Human happiness, meaningful contribution, and sustained well-being of self and community are the ultimate ends to which Agile schools aspire on behalf of the children and families we serve.



“Learning begins with teaching that makes sense.”

TEACHING THAT MAKES SENSE



“Learning begins with teaching that makes sense.”