

"I remember the first time that a grading rubric was attached to a piece of my writing.... Suddenly all the joy was taken away. I was writing for a grade--I was no longer exploring for me. I want to get that back. Will I ever get that back?" --Claire, a student

The Effects of Grading (from extensive research all the way back to 1933):

- *Grades tend to diminish students' interest in whatever they're learning.* A "grading orientation" and a "learning orientation" have been shown to be inversely related, and as far as I can tell, every study that has ever investigated the impact on intrinsic motivation of receiving grades (or instructions that emphasize the importance of getting good grades) has found a negative effect.
- *Grades create a preference for the easiest possible task.* Impress upon students that what they're doing will count toward their grade, and their response will likely be to avoid taking any unnecessary intellectual risks. They'll choose a shorter book, or a project on a familiar topic, in order to minimize the chance of doing poorly--not because they're "unmotivated" but because they're rational. They're responding to adults who, by telling them the goal is to get a good mark, have sent the message that success matters more than learning.
- *Grades tend to reduce the quality of students' thinking.* They may skim books for what they'll "need to know." They're less likely to wonder, say, "How can we be sure that's true?" than to ask "Is this going to be on the test?" In one experiment, students who were told they'd be graded on how well they learned a social studies lesson had more trouble understanding the main point of the text than did students who were told that no grades would be involved. Even on a measure of rote recall, the graded group remembered fewer facts a week later.
- Research has also shown:
  - A grade-oriented environment is associated with increased levels of cheating.
  - Grades (whether or not accompanied by comments) promote a fear of failure even in high-achieving students.
  - The elimination of grades (in favor of a pass/fail system) produces substantial benefits with no apparent disadvantages.

Why Grading is Inherently Problematic

- *Motivation:* While it's true that many students, after a few years of traditional schooling, could be described as motivated by grades, what counts is the nature of their motivation. Extrinsic motivation, which includes a desire to get better grades, is not only different from, but often undermines, intrinsic motivation, a desire to learn for its own sake. [Grades are] a system of rewards and punishments that leads students to chase marks and become less interested in the learning itself.
- *Achievement:* The more students are led to focus on how well they're doing, the less engaged they tend to be with what they're doing. It follows that all assessment must be done carefully and sparingly lest students become so concerned about their achievement (how good they are doing at something--or, worse, how their performance compares to others') that they're no longer thinking about the learning itself.

Excerpts from “The Case Against Grades” by Alfie Kohn.  
Educational Leadership, November 2011.

- *Quantification:* When people ask me, a bit defensively, if it isn’t important to measure how well students are learning (or teachers are teaching), I invite them to rethink their choice of verb. There is certainly value in assessing the quality of learning and teaching, but that doesn’t mean it’s always necessary, or even possible, to measure those things--that is, to turn them into numbers. [...] Once we’re compelled to focus only on what can be reduced to numbers, such as how many grammatical errors are present in a composition or how many mathematical algorithms have been committed to memory, thinking has been severely compromised. And that is exactly what happens when we try to fit learning into a four- or five- or 100-point scale.

Kohn’s conclusion:

- Research suggests that the common tendency of students to focus on grades doesn’t reflect an innate predilection or a “learning style” to be accommodated; rather, it’s due to having been led for years to work for grades. [...] Grades don’t prepare children for the “real world”--unless one has in mind a world where interest in learning and quality of thinking are unimportant. Nor are grades a necessary part of schooling. [...] It takes courage to do right by kids in an era when the quantitative matters more than the qualitative, when meeting (someone else’s) standards counts for more than exploring ideas, and when anything “rigorous” is automatically assumed to be valuable. We have to be willing to challenge conventional wisdom.