



## *Democracy in Grading: Practicing What We Preach*

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### **Abstract**

*This study examined how teachers' grading impacts students' socio-cultural notions of value and worth. At issue was whether teachers can grade in ways that foster democratic ideals; whether authentic democratic environments can truly exist in public school classrooms; and whether or not traditional grading supersedes learning in favor of capitalistic interests. Findings indicated that teachers who champion democratic instruction can use their grading practices to eliminate the need for students to accumulate capital as a means of self-achievement, and can refocus classroom priorities on critical thinking, civility, and promoting a sense of community. One implication of these findings may be that values learned through being assessed and graded in school manifest themselves in students' social capacities such as civic responsibility, community engagement, and future employment.*

**Keywords:** *Grading; Democracy; Pedagogy; Classroom Environment*

*The school is the only institution in our nation specifically charged with enculturating the young into a political democracy. The education of teachers must, therefore, be specifically directed toward this end.*

John Goodlad (1991)

### **Introduction**

Teachers and teacher educators currently practice in a precarious era for public education. Fraught with financial worries, teacher shortages, and challenging classroom environments, they must also manage maligned policy mandates from the highest powers in the land, some of which seem counterintuitive to the aims of public education (Camera, 2017, July 18). Simultaneously, our current political landscape appears to have deliberately undermined the democratic practices that we have traditionally championed in this country (Swenson, 2017, July 10). However, I question whether this undercurrent has less to do with high-powered lobbyists or foreign financial backing than it does with the way in which American students have been taught to assign meaning and value to their work in the ways they are assessed in public school classrooms—and specifically, the ways in which their work is graded.

My institution of higher education proudly states our dedication to “realizing the democratic ideal”—a framework built upon ethical and intellectual commitments, such as: sensitivity toward individual and cultural diversity, respect and appreciation for diverse learners of all ages, a deep knowledge of content, the ability to use technological resources, and a contagious enthusiasm and courage to be creative. The goal of this framework is to prepare dynamic teachers who are reflective practitioners and who will blossom into teacher leaders who embody these same ideals within their classrooms and in their own developing perspectives. Happily, I am continually encouraged and inspired by the zeal of our teacher candidates, and I remain optimistic about their ability to achieve these lofty democratic goals.

Nonetheless, when I think back to my own schooling, it was hardly democratic. Even as an emerging classroom teacher, I remember employing practices that were far more authoritarian than equitable. Over time, my beliefs about teaching and learning evolved and shifted to more student-centered practices incorporating collaboration, promoting autonomy, and the constantly striving to develop a sense of intrinsic motivation among my students. I began to question traditional grading systems, those solely based upon accumulating points to earn a percentage of the whole. What did those grades and percentages truly mean, and how were they influencing student learning? In this present environment, where democratic classrooms are more desperately needed than ever, I wonder if democracy can ever truly exist in classrooms and schools where traditional grading—and the accumulation of capital as a means to an end—is the ruling order of the day.

The fact that grades do not accurately reflect student learning or understanding has been verified by educational researchers who have studied the meaning of grades. Kohn (1999), a stern advocate against formal grading, asserted that grades serve only to reduce students’ interest in learning, to prevent students from attempting challenging tasks, and to limit the quality of students’ thinking. Guskey (2006) found disagreement among teachers as to the purpose of grades and the criterion from which grades are derived. Additionally, Brookhart (2011) verified that grades are not indicative of what students know and can demonstrate, but rather only serve the purpose for marking or reporting progress.

Assessment experts from O’Connor (1999) to Marzano (2000) to McMillan (2001) have established that traditional grades are ill-defined and variable from teacher to teacher, student to student, class to class, and school to school. There is no consistency with which to determine what students’ grades truly mean given the traditional 100-point system. As such, it might be easy to deduce that traditional grades are essentially meaningless. Nevertheless, to assume that grades are inherently meaningless is both paradoxical and problematic.

### **Grades as Status Quo**

Regardless of the advice of assessment experts, traditional grades continue to be the ruling order of the day. Even while more and more school districts are rethinking their grading policies and attempting to comply with the recommendations of experts—typically by introducing standards-based or competency-based grading initiatives—they continue to do so to the tune of confusion and backlash among teachers and parents alike (Young, 2012, November 8). Traditional grades are so deeply entrenched in our societal status quo that it is difficult for the lay population to conceive of school without them, and many people attribute their understanding and progress within school to the traditional grading measures. Even outside of school, traditional As, Bs, and Cs are used to “grade” everything from restaurants to hotels to cars to the NFL Draft. In one sense, traditional grades hold immense social meaning. There is a historical comfort that traditional

grades offer the collective population, the vast majority of whom have endured traditional grading practices themselves and have ascribed them a measure of ubiquity and authority.

Additionally, grades carry a great deal of meaning for students and for their families. Competition for valedictorianships are fierce. Colleges and universities still accept students based on Grade Point Average, as well as national test scores, and those facts are not lost on students. Students take honors classes to boost GPAs. They barter with teachers for grade point-retrieval. They submit extra credit to increase their raw scores. Cramming for tests is the norm. The lack of authentic connections to their own lives is irrelevant as they busy themselves accumulating as many points as they possibly can in the inexorable rat race that school has become. Within such institutionalized systems, those governed by “token economies” that traditional grades represent (Ayllon and Azrin, 1968), actual learning is oftentimes relegated to an afterthought, or at least subjugated to what Brown (2015) refers to as “the human capital race,” all in pursuit of career and college readiness.

### **Purpose of the Study: Thesis and Guiding Questions**

This article is an offshoot of a larger work related to alternative grading in secondary schools and the impact of traditional grading practices. My overarching thesis is that the ways in which teachers grade are directly impacting notions of value and worth among their students. In turn, these values will manifest themselves in social capacities such as civic responsibility, community engagement, and employment opportunities. The research questions for this revolve around notions of democracy related to traditional grading systems, as such:

1. How can teachers grade students in ways that foster democratic ideals and communities?
2. How can truly democratic environments exist in public school classrooms?
3. Do traditional grades supersede learning in lieu of capitalistic interests?

While these questions inform the body of this article and the crystallization of my larger work, I postulate that even in classrooms with the most democratic of aspirations, if a traditional, points-based grading system is employed it undermines any democratic value a teacher hoped to achieve.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical foundation of this paper consists of twin pillars of Deweyan constructivism and the theoretical framework of grading purported by Brookhart (1994), which has been corroborated by other experts in the field of assessment (Guskey, 2006; Marzano, 2000; O’Connor, 1999; Reeves, 2008). Additionally, the work of Goodlad (1991, 2004) supplies a bridge between these two frameworks, adhering to a fierce sense of democracy and duty, but simultaneously committed to an authentic sense of learning at the expense of traditional grading practices. This theoretical framework will be outlined in the paragraphs below.

### **Constructivism and Progressivism**

The progressivism and constructive approach that Dewey (1916) advocated was staunchly framed within a dedication to realizing the democratic ideal. His aims manifest themselves as the

antithesis to promoting achievement over learning and the type of “grade-grubbing” for personal advancement that has become so commonplace in American classrooms. Dewey maintained that education should never be used as an instrument of exploitation of one social class over another. Indeed, he warned of the national aims of education—devotion and commitment to national loyalty and patriotism—superseding the social aims of education—to equip youth with the teaching and discipline to be masters of their own economic and social careers. As Dewey (1916) maintained, only through the freedom found in these social aims can a truly democratic ideal be sustained, and without it, democracy can only be “inconsistently applied” (p. 99).

Goodlad echoed this sentiment when he necessitated that the role of public schools is to foster the ideals of democracy. “The school is the only institution in our nation specifically charged with enculturating the young into a political democracy. The education of teachers must, therefore, be specifically directed toward this end...Schools, through their teachers, must introduce our young people to the ideas inherent in our political democracy and the ideals from which they are derived” (Goodlad, 1991, p. 48).

Goodlad placed this democratic charge firmly within the scope of the classroom teacher. “We should expect in our teachers a driving purpose: to maximize the learning of those placed in their charge. And because even sincere educational purposes can be corrupted by misguided beliefs about learning potential, our educators...must also believe in the ability of all to learn; and they must hold steadfastly to this belief in their work” (Goodlad, 1991, p. 44). This directive for teachers to maximize learning within their classrooms may seem intuitive, but it is one that requires constant attention and reflection.

To that end, Goodlad related the analogy of teachers to gardeners cultivating their fields. “If we believe that the ideas as well as the rights of the Constitution come to each of us with birth, then the role of schools and teachers is diminished. But if we believe, as we must, that the rights inherited at birth depend on careful cultivation of ideals and ideas in the community, then schools and teachers rise to positions of paramount importance” (Goodlad, 1991, p. 45). It is imperative that teachers are intentional about embracing this all-important charge.

## **Grading**

In order to document genuine learning, educators appear stuck with the process of grading, and traditional grading, specifically, contains inherent flaws that have been empirically proven by assessment experts. Namely, grades do not clearly measure students’ abilities (O’Connor, 1999), grades are inconsistent and vary within different contexts, and hodgepodge grading practices are prevalent (McMillan, 2001). Still, the original intention of grades as a mechanism to report student achievement remains. Wormeli (2006) advocated that grades should be indicative of students’ actual abilities, and behavioral considerations should not factor into a student’s grade. This view has been upheld by assessment experts, and has served as the foundation for alternatives to traditional grading practices such as minimum grading (Carifio and Carey, 2010), standards-based grading (Guskey, 2009, Scriffiny, 2008), and even no grading at all (Kohn, 2011).

A gradeless classroom is in keeping with Goodlad’s (1976) vision of assessment. He pictured a school without grades or report cards, nor extrinsic rewards of any kind, but only performance evaluation. This is perhaps a bit utopian, especially after nearly 50 years of adherence to traditional grading where students and teachers have allowed the accumulation of points to determine value and worth, almost exclusively. In today’s school culture, extrinsic rewards are often regarded as the sole purpose for doing anything, or at least for doing anything of value. However,

according to experts like Guskey and Jung (2009), grades should be more precise than that – they should accurately communicate students’ academic performance on specific sets of skills. When classroom teachers are intentional in their grading practices, it can have a deciding factor in the ways students go about the learning process, and ultimately affect the learning climate of the classroom.

### **Data Sources and Methods**

In addition to reflections from my own personal experience as a classroom teacher, teacher educator, and researcher of assessment and grading practices, much of the data for this paper comes from a year-long qualitative study of five high school teachers who implemented an alternative grading system within their classes (Percell, 2014). Teachers were selected based upon the fact that their grading systems were not built upon points and/or percentages. The study itself presented as a multi-case phenomenology, however, for the purposes of this article, one case, Simon’s, was specifically analyzed for the democratic considerations that were incorporated into the teacher’s grading.

### **Methodology in the Data Collection**

Data collection occurred over a period of one academic school year and the initial study included five high school teachers at four separate sites who each employed alternative grading methods within their classrooms. The data collection of the initial study was comprised of four main elements: initial semi-structured interviews; an online focus group interview; follow-up interviews debriefing the focus group and reflecting on the study itself; and a self-analysis of the teacher participants’ own feedback to students. All interviews were limited to 60 minutes, were audio recorded on the researcher’s tablet, and were member checked to ensure trustworthiness.

### **Data Analysis: An Individual Case Study**

After the initial data analysis using phenomenological methods (Moustakas, 1994), one case stood out as having a particular focus upon democratic ideals and an adherence to social justice issues. Therefore, Simon’s case was extracted for individual analysis in support of this current project. Using open coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), Simon’s case was analyzed for common themes relating to democracy, citizenry, and justice as a result of the teacher’s grading system. Four themes were established from Simon’s case: Freedom, Democracy, Critical Thinking, and Citizenry. This analysis was appropriate for the bounded context, as case study has been established as a distinctly qualitative design specifically geared towards the field of education (Merriam, 2009). Additionally, trustworthiness was upheld in this case through naturalized generalizability (Stake, 1995) for readers interested in democratic implications from their own grading practices.

### **Participant: Simon, Social Sciences Teacher**

This case featured Simon, a second-year social sciences teacher at Middleton High School, which was located in a mid-size, rural-fringe area that is diverse in nature. Twenty-two percent of

Middleton's 1,942 students came from low socio-economic situations and 10% have individualized education plans. Simon was a socially conscious individual and felt strongly about issues of justice, diversity, equality and fairness. Outside of school, he was an active member in several community organizations that promoted advocating for issues of justice and community awareness. Simon overtly attempted to incorporate these philosophies into his teaching in efforts to make his classes more democratic and encourage more critical thinking among his students.

Additionally, Simon did not use the traditional, points-based gradings system. Instead, at the time of the study, he employed the 3-P Grading system (Peha, 2005). In this system, students were "graded" in the areas of Participation, Progress, and Performance. Within each category, students received one of three marks: a check (✓) meaning sufficient, a check plus (✓+) meaning outstanding, or a minus (−) meaning unsatisfactory. Just as in other mastery-based grading systems, retakes were allowed so students could revise any minuses until they reached a level of demonstrated proficiency.

One interesting aspect in the 3-P's Grading System Simon used was the element of collaboration with students to arrive at their final grades. Since final traditional letter grades are difficult to ascertain with the 3-P system alone, Simon would regularly conference with his students about their standing in the class, the assessment of their coursework, and students offered insight into what they feel their grade should be based on their quality of work. His students' assessments were not just empty words, either; they counted for 50% of the final grade (Peha, 2005). This type of collaborative negotiation gives 3-P Grading a distinctly democratic feel over other traditional forms of grading.

## Findings

After analyzing the data specific to Simon, four common themes were identified related to the democratic consideration regarding his grading system: Freedom, Democracy, Critical Thinking, and Citizenry. It was clear from the data that Simon was a teacher with a core belief system regarding education and civility, and he adhered to those beliefs in his instructional practices within the classroom, even regarding his grading.

### Freedom

Simon discussed Freedom several times in his interview(s), and from different perspectives: for his students, a freedom to have a share of control over their learning, and for himself, a freedom from the confines of traditional points-based grading practices. It was obvious that instilling a sense of freedom in students and adhering to a practice of freedom was central to Simon's teaching:

If we want to truly practice freedom, we need to structure the process to be as free as possible. If my students were free to explore and learn what they really want to learn, then I think that would be a higher reflection of good teaching.

Simon's commitment of freedom manifests itself in his instructional practices, such as his assignments and grading. Some teachers may balk at a lack of rigidity, but for Simon it seems to carry an inherent sense of accountability. "I don't have strict due dates for most things. All of my

tests are basically application-critical thinking-response, or project-based, so, it's not something that students can cheat on."

Regarding his 3-P grading system specifically, where grades are both scored and negotiated student-to-teacher, Simon stated, "With my grading system, it frees everything up and I'm not bound to a rigid points system. The grading procedures is affecting [instruction], but for me, it's freeing it up."

For whatever reason, these sentiments expressed by Simon do not seem to be traditionally embraced by schools. Notions of freedom are often situated outside of the denotative aims of schooling, which largely center around conformity, especially within school grading practices. Perhaps that is why Simon's commitment to promoting his students' freedom rings so odd in contrast to the status quo. "Education," he said, "can either be a means to indoctrinating young people into the way things already work, the mechanisms of the current institutions and systems, or it can be a way to practice freedom."

## **Democracy**

Simon displayed a particularly intentional commitment to democratic practices in his teaching, both in content and in process, and that sense of shared governance was apparent in his classes. He did not mince words when he articulated his commitment to democracy in his practice. "I'm slowly trying to make my classroom more democratic," he said, "and for my students to have more share of the power in our relationship. I want to give them more freedom, because I think power should be shared, society should be democratic, and we should be free."

These seem like difficult concepts for many teachers to embrace, especially to those who have not only endured schools that were authoritarian in nature, but who have also completed teacher education programs that have directed them to wield a certain power and control over their classrooms. Nonetheless, Simon remained invested in democratic principles, and carried out his shared vision right down to the specifics of coursework and assignments. "I give [students] power to decide for themselves the parameters and projects, and even who will do the assessing."

## **Critical Thinking**

Another theme that arose from the data in Simon's case study was his commitment to fostering critical thinking among students. Critical thinking, as Holland (2018, June 11) points out, is more than just thinking of correct answers, but the ability to sit with a given problem, to mull it over, and to envision multiple solutions rather than just the first one that comes to mind. Simon concurred, stating, "We're not really encouraged to think sociologically or critically. So, the first intervention happens on the first or second day, when I say, 'I am encouraging you to question everything we do in this class; even question me, challenge me.'"

Simon again pointed to his alternative grading system and his feedback practices as a way to usher in a reliance upon critical thinking in the classroom. "The grading system itself is a challenge and a critique of the institution that we are in, it leads [students] to think—the grading system itself leads to critical thinking."

Critical thinking has been a goal of education for over a century (Holland, 2018, June 11), and yet, many of the common practices of schooling only serve to diminish students' capacity towards critical thinking. However, through his grading practices, Simon's focus continued to be moving his students towards critical thinking, even in the feedback he was giving to students. "The

feedback that I tend to give is trying to encourage my students to think more critically and to keep exploring and keep opening their minds.”

### **Civility**

The final theme that arose from Simon’s case study data was a commitment to fostering a sense of civility among his students. It was clear this was an overt focus within his classroom. “If you actually want to inspire change in people’s consciousness through education, you have to—sort of—do education in a way that will allow for that,” he stated, “and I don’t think that traditional, hierarchical, points-based, ranked, competitive education models allow for that.”

Goodlad (1991) concurred with such sentiments when he summarized the task of public school teaching as: “facilitating enculturation, providing access to knowledge, building an effective teacher-student connection, and practicing good stewardship” (p.46). He went on to relate that “society’s moral shortcomings lie primarily in grossly misunderstanding what our schools are for and underestimating what is required of those who are their daily stewards. The school system’s moral delinquency is in structuring the enterprise in ways that deny students access to the knowledge they need” (Goodlad, 1991, p. 53).

### **Discussion and Implications**

What becomes burgeoningly clear from Simon’s case was his commitment to a progressive belief in the democracy of education. All of his pedagogy was centered around this commitment, including his style of grading students which, out of necessity, eschewed all points and percentages. The convergence of Simon’s instructional practices as rooted in his educational philosophy served to bring about this promotion of democratic ideals throughout his classroom.

The four generated themes generated in the data analysis and detailed above: Freedom, Democracy, Critical Thinking, and Civility held some interesting implications for answering the initial research question of this case study: *How can teachers grade students in ways that foster democratic ideals and communities?* It was clear that Simon extended a measure of freedom to his students, allowing them to practice collaboration and negotiation as valued partners in the learning process, and even in classroom assessment and grading. Because of his philosophical beliefs and his insistence on his classroom serving as a model of democracy, he felt compelled to remove any capitalistic influences that adherence to a points-based grading system might impose. Admittedly, given his druthers he would likely do away with grading altogether. “Grading...to me is like a necessary evil within the system,” he said. “Really, I just do it because I have to.”

Additionally, his case also offered insight towards answering the second question of this study: *How can truly democratic environments exist in public school classrooms?* It takes a teacher, or according to Goodlad (2004), a “steward” (p. 324), with a deep-seeded belief structure rooted in cultivating democratic principles and civic duty. It requires one who is willing to analyze their instructional practices and bring everything into alignment with democratic ideals, including room set-up, coverage of content, format and scope of assignments and projects, and even assessment and grading of said assignments and projects. Oftentimes, this intentional commitment to a democratic approach within the classroom may fly in the face of traditional notions of how school operates.

It was unclear whether Simon’s data could answer our third question: *Do traditional grades supersede learning in lieu of capitalistic interests?* In the data, Simon clearly his students about



the inherent problems with capitalism. At one point he stated, “The institution as a whole exists to socialize people into the logic of the current systems, and to create hierarchical ranks—you know, wage slaves for capitalism.”

Furthermore, by not employing a traditional grading system within his classroom, it was impossible to test and verify these conditions. However, it appears that by replacing the traditional, points-based grading system with an alternative grading system, one that fostered more democratic practices, Simon was able to consciously disrupt the normative capitalistic undertones of his classroom.

Finally, Simon demonstrated ways in which teachers can grade students in order to foster democratic ideals and communities. By overtly attempting to give his students a share of the power dynamic within the class and extending them genuine control and agency over their learning, he created a classroom dynamic built on shared governance, collaboration, and compromise. Using his teaching platform to promote education as a means to freedom, democracy, critical thinking, and civility, Simon intentionally worked to foster the type of “moral ecology” that Goodlad (2004) described as a means to connect students’ schooling to a measure of the larger public good (p. 318).

### **Conclusion**

An individual case was extracted from a larger multi-case study and analyzed due to one teacher, Simon’s, overt commitment to a particular educational belief structure, namely democracy. His case was analyzed in isolation to examine how democratic ideals manifested themselves in his grading and classroom practices. Consistent with Goodlad’s (1991) notion of the school being “the only institution in our nation specifically charged with enculturating the young into a political democracy” (p. 48), Simon took this charge seriously. While he maintained a critical perspective, he viewed of the aims of the current institution of school as being bent more toward indoctrination than mere “enculturation.” Simon stated, “Education is indoctrination and it perpetuates the system. In a capitalist society like ours, you need people to accept the logic of capitalism and become workers in a system that exploits them.”

It was clear that Simon took intentional measures to disrupt this capitalistic culture that dominates most public-school classrooms. Instead, he found ways to promote freedom, democracy, critical thinking and civility through his pedagogy and, in particular, through his grading practices. By eliminating the need for students to accumulate capital as a means to self-achievement, Simon was able to refocus the classroom priorities of his students towards a sense of genuine learning and community.

Simon is a good example for stakeholders of public education, particularly teachers, who maintain a belief in democratic ideals. By critically examining the meaning behind the grading practices teachers employ and enact upon their students, we can gain a clearer sense of the influence these systems are having upon the sense of community and student learning within our classrooms. It may be that traditional grading is achieving the desired effect—lulling students into completing the bare minimum requirements and dulling their collective sense of wonder and ingenuity over time, producing the “wage slaves for capitalism” that Simon described. However, if we, teachers and teacher educators, truly champion our instructional practices as emblematic of democracy and its influence in our classrooms, we must endeavor to carry out our democratic pedagogical practices all the way to our gradebooks.

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