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Going Gradeless: Evaluation over Time Helps Students Learn to Write

Jan Loveless

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"I must admit... I hadn't read the assignment...but should this count so highly toward my six weeks grade, then my semester grade, in my case my acceptance into U of M and furtherly my whole future?"

It was midnight, and Henry's anguished journal demanded a response. We were three weeks into Advanced Composition, an accelerated writing course for college-bound seniors. The tone of Henry's outcry sounded frustratingly familiar.

I'd taught writing for years, to students in all the public secondary grades, even to college freshmen, juniors, and seniors at Ohio State. But I'd never had a group that bothered me more than these bright seniors. They were attentive, responsive, cooperative, but so fixated on grades they weren't learning as I'd hoped they would. The depth of my frustration, however, probably stemmed from my recent experience with seventh graders, with whom I had successfully de-emphasized grades as an evaluation device. Perhaps, I thought, I could repeat that success in my senior class by making it the object of an action research project designed to determine the effects of eliminating grades for an extended period of time.

For the previous three years, I'd been experimenting with a process approach to writing instruction and evaluation in seventh grade. At first I'd graded each piece as usual, even though I let students choose their own topics and otherwise conducted my classes as Donald Graves, Nancie Atwell, and Lucy Calkins suggested in books and workshops. Then I'd gotten brave enough to try grading overtime. I found the seventh graders very responsive to evaluation conferences in which we looked together at their growth as writers and set goals for their future work. In fact, I felt they'd progressed more rapidly and with much greater responsibility for their learning than they had when I'd been grading each piece.

Now, though, I was a new teacher of a successful, well-tested curriculum that had always had traditional grading of products. A colleague and I had modified Advanced Composition to include more workshop time, but we'd also decided to continue making assignments. We had only 18

weeks with the seniors. Our primary task was to get them to consider audience and purpose for everything they wrote. We hoped to move them from egocentric, formulaic writers to what we called "veteran" status. We wanted them to know they had choices, and to make them consciously.

But Henry and his peers were thinking so "furtherly" in the future that they were not choosing and growing in the present. Regardless of the comments I wrote on their papers, they flipped through, found the grade, and punched it into their calculators to see if Bigname U. would tolerate their up-to-the-minute averages.

I had just become involved in a teachers-as-researchers group, and I needed a focus for inquiry. Henry had given me an idea. Since I couldn't change the reality that it was October and my students were anxious about college acceptance, I decided to try getting their attention by removing their grades. Portfolio grading worked with my seventh graders, I reasoned— why not with these seniors? So I replied to Henry with a proposition to both classes. Let's "go gradeless" for the second marking period, I suggested. My job would be to comment carefully and thoroughly on their papers, to confer with them in class, to help them set goals for themselves as writers. Their job would be to log all my comments, dividing them into constructive criticism and praise and recording them on Goals/Kudos sheets in their cumulative folders; to work hard; and to help me monitor their feelings through conferences and regular, honest journals. At the end of the marking period, I would ask them to do a self-evaluation of their work, including writing goals for the next marking period. Then I would look at everything they'd written, at the goals they'd already tackled, and at their self-evaluations, and I'd award them grades for their writing growth for the semester to date.

I promised my Advanced Compers that anyone who felt terribly uncomfortable could bail out of the experiment at any time. The only catch, I added, was that they could not "have it both ways." If some students asked me to return to grading their products, I would not also evaluate their progress over time. Their grades would be a standard average of the grades of all the pieces they'd finished.

I emphasized that in all respects except for evaluation, the course would remain the same. I already ran it as a workshop, with mini-lessons and conference/writing time daily. The students already had frequent opportunities for getting peer response and advice on revision and editing, and I already commented heavily on papers and held regular conferences with my students. The single major change in operation would be that I would no longer grade individual

papers. At the end of the second marking period, I added, the classes could vote by secret ballot to decide our evaluation technique for the final marking period of the course.

I asked my students to write a journal responding to my suggestion. To my great surprise, all 47 Advanced Composition students agreed to participate in the experiment. I had my chance to test my hypothesis. Would they learn the concepts of the course more thoroughly if they had no regular external measures of their progress beyond my comments, their peers' remarks, and their own goal-setting? They'd given me at least six weeks to find out.

Now that I had my students' collaboration in an evaluation experiment, I needed to see what other researchers and experts thought about evaluation over time and student self-evaluation as motivators of learning. I had just received in the mail a 1987 publication, *NCTE Research Report No. 23, Response to student Writing* by Sarah Warshauer Freedman. She documents a 1984 study of "560 successful (K- 12) writing teachers from diverse communities, and a survey of 715 of their secondary students (grades 7-12)" (3). She also discusses a study of response in the classrooms of two San Francisco Bay Area ninth grade English teachers.

Based on my own observations of seniors, the results she reported were no surprise.

For many of the ninth-grade students we watched, grades loom larger than what they learn. These students seem to be caught in an institutional bind; grades (the school's and society's measure of learning) and the response that accompanies grades (and often justifies them) are confused with and become more important than the feedback that is more essential to helping them learn. The students are interested in the product of learning more than the learning process. (Freedman 158)

In Chapter 6, entitled "What Have We Learned and Where Do We Go from Here?," Freedman concludes that "

Radical reorganization of classrooms will be needed in order to make writing and learning more important or even as important as grading from the students' points of view (161).

Furthermore, In an article about her research for the October 1987 *English Journal*, Freedman advocates grading over time, or portfolio grading, as one way to avoid what she calls "an impoverished view of the functions and uses of writing... only as something to be done for a grade in school" (38).

One of my goals for the students in Advanced Composition is to help them learn to evaluate their own writing, particularly in terms of the concepts of the course. I want them to learn to ask, always, "Who are my readers?

What do they already know? What do they need to know? What is my purpose in writing for them? How can I best accomplish that purpose?" If they learn to stand back from their writing and evaluate it on these premises, they will outgrow their need for teacher evaluation. All writers need to make writing a social activity and bounce their ideas off others, but they can improve even their first drafts tremendously if they can internalize these questions and assess themselves.

Brian Johnston devotes his 1983 book *Assessing English: Helping Students to Reflect on Their Work* to this idea of teaching students to internalize. He believes that if students cannot articulate what they are learning, then they are not learning in a way which is conscious and under their control... If I am right that many students do not reflect, conceptualize and deliberately experiment in English lessons, we should be asking "Why not?" Part of the answer is that when teachers are expected to grade or mark each piece of work, then they do the reflecting and conceptualizing for the students. In many classes there is a gaping hole in the learning cycle: students do the work, the teacher assesses it, the students look to see how the assessments compare with what they hoped for, and go straight on to the next experience without even rereading their work, let alone reflecting on it. Little wonder that many students make little progress in English in secondary school. (2-3)

Johnston also believes that when students write self-assessments of their own work, they learn from the task, as "written self-assessments can consolidate learning, identify challenges and give students practice at presenting themselves" (90).

Such a view is reinforced by Peter Elbow in the 1986 collection of his essays, *Embracing Contraries: Explorations In Learning and Teaching*. Elbow says that the real agenda of grading is to get the learner to make "internal and autonomous" the standards that originate outside himself (167). His prescription for accomplishing this purpose is to teach students to evaluate themselves so that they can get "a more accurate and explicit message of evaluation than traditional grades contain" (167-168).

In addition to self-evaluation, Elbow recommends evaluation of portfolios to increase the trustworthiness of grading (222). When such evaluation over time is combined with student self-evaluation, "you can usually draw a remarkably trustworthy conclusion about what the student actually learned and how skilled she is" (Elbow 226). When teachers ask for such self- evaluations before they grade student portfolios, they dramatically improve grade accuracy.

If self-evaluations are solicited in an honest, thoughtful way (perhaps with specific questions to spur detail), students usually write a detailed and honest account of what they have done and learned; and thereby give the teacher much more reliable information for grading— and for evaluating her own teaching. (None of this speaks to the other benefit of self-evaluations: students gain much more awareness and control over themselves as learners.) (Elbow 227)

Elbow concludes that students often “read commentary better when there is no grade” (231). In a section on “The Response Theory of Teaching,” in the second edition of *A Writer Teaches Writing*, Donald Murray also argues for careful response to student work coupled with grading over time, so that students have the opportunity to show what they’ve learned from their failures. He advocates encouraging the student writer to reflect on his process and become his own first reader. The teacher, then, “monitors the text and the writer’s response to the text” (139).

Murray says that the best writing teachers are coaches, attuned to “insights and accidents and perceptions that are occurring in the arena of the classroom” (144). The most difficult job of the writing teacher, he adds, is “to shut up, to wait, to listen, to let your students teach themselves, for through that teaching they will learn the most” (144).

Armed with what I felt was strong backing from other researchers and accepted experts on writing, I calculated my last set of grades on products and began my experiment. The second marking period started in mid-October. My first act was to ask my Advanced Comp students to tell me how they felt about the new grading system we’d agreed to try a few weeks earlier. After years of standard grading in all their classes, they began with a bit of waffling, apprehensive about our experiment, but generally positive. The following students’ reactions reflect the attitudes of both classes.

Henry, barely holding his fears for the future in check and very much aware that English had been the bane of his G.P.A., said, “I like the new grading system because I feel that it will help my writing and that is why I took this class. My only problem area is that we all get good grades at the end of the six weeks and that I motivate myself enough to do any papers properly, knowing that there isn’t going to be a grade. But I feel that if the teacher praises and then adds a few helpers, our writing will drastically improve.” [Author’s note: Student comments are included verbatim, with their spelling and punctuation.]

Class valedictorian with exceptional math and

science talents, Michelle seemed fairly relaxed. “I’m feeling pretty good about this new system. I was worried that I wouldn’t know how I was doing until the end when it would be too late. I really like the idea of keeping a log with all of the comments I receive in it. As long as I know where I stand, and I know what I’m doing well on and what I need to work on, I will be happy. I haven’t been worrying a lot about grades recently (this year).”

Cari, the only junior in Advanced Composition and editor-in-chief of the student newspaper, wants a career in writing. She thought the new system might help her reach her goals. “I still believe in this experimental grading system. I feel it will be especially profitable for me, because I intend to make a lot of progress this six weeks. The goals that I listed on the evaluation sheet are not just what I hope to accomplish, they’re what I need to accomplish. I think it will be helpful to all the students, whether they do or not, because school is for learning, not making a grade. Grades are just some sort of tangible reference to progress, but they are not always accurate. If they were fail-safe, then there would be no need for teachers to affix extra letters or numbers after the letter grades on a report card,” Cari added, with a comment on the Midland computerized coding system. You know the ones that stand for ‘makes contributions to class,’ ‘appears to be working conscientiously,’ ‘appears to have the ability to do better,’ ‘please telephone,’ etc.”

By November 2, I had handed back the first heavily-commented-on- but-ungraded papers. The students’ assignment had been to write personal essays or letters on some topic about Dow High School to two different readers, showing through diction and tone that they’d seriously considered the audience of each piece. The day after they got their papers back, I asked my classes to write journals telling me how they felt about not getting grades on the assignment. Almost without exception, they felt shaky and insecure, but still willing to continue.

Henry had written about the problems of local skateboarders to two editors— of *Thrasher* magazine, and of the *Midland Daily News*. He was justifiably pleased with his efforts, but felt the new system would not reward him adequately. “I did quite well on this subject except for my editing, so I would of got a grade (A- or better), because although editting is important, it is easily changed. So I sort of wish that I got a grade, but I think that at the end of the six weeks, if I improve my editing and continue my same standard of writting, I should get an A.” Then Henry began to speculate about the future, and his old fears returned. “The problem is if I do badly on the next paper in the writting area

and not the editing area, I will have decreased instead of increased and my grade is dead, but in the old grading scale I would have an A from this paper and say a C from the next paper, which would be a B (not bad)."

Michelle, who had sounded so relaxed before she got her paper back, now had a bad case of nerves. "I'm a little nervous after seeing my first paper without a grade. Last night I calmed down so I'm going to survive to the end of the six weeks. I think it will work. I especially like writing down any comments. Even if we go back to the regular system in the third six weeks, I'd like to continue to write down the comments on my papers."

Writer-to-be Cari, the most emphatically positive at the beginning of the marking period, now sounded determined to remain so, despite some misgivings. "I was gung-ho for this new grading thing, so I certainly can't complain about it now. My initial reaction to my paper was disappointment, since the comments fell short in the area of praise. But I'm thinking it through, and I guess that it really doesn't do me a lot of good to get praise, since I know what I do well. The criticism can only be helpful. I don't like it, therefore I'll have to do something to change it. It's true that if I plan to write for a living, I'll have to perfect my work."

Although they had some qualms about the grading system, no one wanted to bail out. At the end of the marking period, I asked students to complete a self-evaluation of their progress (see appendix) before I looked at their folders. My last question on the sheet asked what they recommended we do about evaluation for the next marking period. Through their remarks on their self-evaluations, I learned that all the students had perceived changes in their behavior as writers and an increase in their knowledge of communication. Still, 9 of 25 students in one class and 6 of 22 in the other said they would wait until they had grades for the marking period to commit to continuing the "gradeless" system. Once they received their grades, however, their journals gave me unanimous response: continue with the new grading system through the end of the course.

I was delighted, because I had discovered that the new system lifted two of my psychological burdens. For one thing, I no longer felt that my remarks on a paper had to justify a grade. Though I still spent lots of time reading papers, I now read much more like a "real reader" than a grader. The other personal bonus of the system was that I never had to deal with debaters, those students who always before had argued for a higher grade. Now the class atmosphere was truly collegial when I handed back a set of papers. Through portfolio evaluation, we had become an

actual community of writers.

Most of my students not only agreed to continue the gradeless system, but also seemed pleased to do so. Henry's comments on his self-evaluation articulated the attitude of the whole group: I have a very good understanding of what my problems are with my writing as well as my good points in my writing...

I have begun to feel proud of my writing because I am writing quite well and sense I know my problems. I will improve on them. This has given me confidence that I will be able to write well on my college papers.... I no longer think that grades are everything, but improving my writing for college... I forgot about the new grading system when working on papers and, it made no difference in my effort, and I liked the fact that when my paper came back, I would try to improve myself from the constructive criticism and gain confidence from the positive comments."

Despite his increasing confidence, Henry had hesitated to commit to an evaluation system for the third marking period. "When I get my grade," he'd written. Once he received his grade, Henry felt sure the system had fostered his growth. "I think you should do exactly the same thing," he wrote. "This has greatly improved my writing and I am feeling confident that I will be able to survive all those college papers."

Michelle had earned a B the first marking period. Without knowing her grade for the second marking period, she wanted to return to graded assignments. "I found I was highly motivated by grades," she said, "and this six weeks I had a problem motivating myself. When I get a grade I don't like it pushes me to do better." But Michelle did not maintain her negative tone throughout her self-evaluation. "This six weeks I feel as though I honestly worked harder," she concluded.

Ironically, considering her uncertain attitude, Michelle brought me a book she'd been reading as a student representative to the school district's Curriculum Council subcommittee on the gifted and talented. A chapter in Barbara Clark's *Growing Up Gifted: Developing the Potential of Children at Home and at School* recommends grading over time for all students, regardless of their intellectual gifts. Even for outstanding students, Clark says, traditional grading causes

The risk of lessening their intrinsic motivation and creating a reward situation that makes learning only a

means, not a fulfilling or exciting pursuit in its own right. For less successful students, grades serve only to demean and debilitate their self-concept further. The research shows that downgraded students continue to fail. (319)

However, in evaluation without grades, “the teacher is the facilitator who helps the students discover their strengths and weaknesses and their interests and abilities, and who guides their growth toward greater fulfillment of their potential” (Clark 320).

When I asked Michelle why she’d brought me a book that argued for grading over time if she wanted to return to traditional grading of products, she admitted that she had not read the chapter, but just thought I would be interested in anything on evaluation. The next night she read the chapter herself, then decided to continue with evaluation overtime. Clark’s rationale coupled with her peers’ decisions convinced Michelle to give the system another marking period.

Cari, who earned a B under the new method, was still enthusiastic. In fact, she recommended no change other than recording her comments on a separate Goals/Kudos sheet for each assignment. “I feel you’re on target with your evaluation of me,” she said in her response to my comments on her portfolio. “We seem to have identified my necessary goals accurately. My only worry is that you may think (because of my apparent lack of self-discipline) that I am some sort of slacker... I do learn more in this class than any other, and I do enjoy it...”

By the end of the second six weeks on the new grading system, enthusiasm for it was well entrenched. Students seemed aware of how much they’d learned. Though they were now finished with Advanced Composition, most had clear goals for continuing to improve their writing in the future.

Henry, once so worried that a single grade would keep him out of U or M, wrote on his final self-evaluation, “I have actually tried to make my writing better because I want to, not because of a grade. My awareness of comments and goals has helped me improve my writing and caused me (to) gain confidence in my writing style and give myself a pat on the back... I actually cared about my writing. ...I never thought I would so much. I take my writing very personally now, like it is a part of me.” Henry’s goals for the future included “editing carefully, especially spelling.”

Michelle, who had been so dependent on grades as measures of her progress, had finished the semester with an A-. She credited her success to lots of comments and grading overtime, “I knew exactly what I needed to work on to improve my writing,” she wrote. “It was nice to get legible

comments other than ‘interesting,’ ‘o.k.’ or ‘Come on! I expect better!’ — which is what I got from [another teacher] last year... In the past when I’d try something new... I couldn’t tell what my teacher didn’t like because any comments I received weren’t legible or specific... The evaluation procedures made me realize that I learned a lot more than I thought I had. I’m used to measuring how much I learned in a class by how many theories or events in history we learned, but in Adv. Comp. a lot of what we learn is how to use what we already know. Like, I already thought about my reader when I wrote a letter to a friend, I just didn’t worry about my reader in school. The evaluation procedures showed me my progress and forced me to think about my goals.”

What Michelle was really saying was that grades had become less important to her in part because she now understood where they came from—and in part because she now accepted responsibility for her own learning. Her comments echoed Peter Elbow’s:

Grades can only wither away in Importance when they cease to be ambiguous and magical. The present system too often allows the student to feel them as judgments based on hidden criteria, judgments which he cannot understand and has little power over. If he is rewarded he feels he did the right things, but if the reward fails he never knows which step in the rain dance he missed. (167-168)

Michelle now knew all the steps in the rain dance. Her long and specific final self-evaluation ended with a confession. In the past, she wrote, when she received a grade on a paper, she just looked at the paper as a whole instead of focusing on the areas to improve. “I would think (when I received a graded paper) that either the paper was good or bad, but I had no idea why, and furthermore I didn’t care.” She went on to say that she had been leery of portfolio grading because she’d read a short story about a college that did not give grades on individual assignments. Shortly before a boy graduated, he broke into the records room and found out that he’d been graded on everything; he’d never been told the grades. Michelle closed with “I was afraid that was how our class was going to be. I guess my fears were unfounded!”

Cari, whose final grade for the course remained a B, was nevertheless enthusiastic about the grading system. “It’s easier to improve on comments rather than grades since they tell me exactly what I need to do to improve. I learned a lot this way.” Carl’s goals for the future included “improving research skills.”

On the last day of class, I asked students to complete an evaluation of the course and a second “Are You A Writer?” sheet. They’d completed the first on the first day of class.

Cari's comments on her evaluation of the course summed up, I thought, the feelings of other students... and made me feel great. "The no-grading system was most helpful, because I think it gave the teacher more reason to give lots of comments, and provided me with specific suggestions for improvement. No grades means no getting down on myself, and no getting arrogant either. Generally being treated as an adult... was a lesson in self-discipline for me. I think more classes should be run this way."

As I tabulated my grades for the end of the semester in Advanced Comp., I noted that I came out with an almost A/B split. Discounting pluses and minuses, I had 22 A's, 21 B's, and 4 C's. At first I worried about grade inflation, but then remembered that this was an advanced course. Most students who would have failed chose to take other courses. Also, I took pride in the sort of inflation Donald Murray noticed when he began to withhold grades from individual assignments in the middle of a similar workshop course at the college level:

After a few weeks the C students, not realizing they were C students and seeing what the B students could do in workshop, began to surpass their own expectations and mine. After a few more weeks the D and F students, who I had thought were working but had sensibly given up—they had a string of D's and F's in the first weeks of the course that could never be overcome—began to write papers that caught up with the C students, and sometimes zoomed right past... I realized that my students had to rehearse and practice the same way that artists, performers, actors, athletes, soldiers, and cooks all have to have an opportunity to learn a craft through a series of failures and successes before they face evaluation... The result at the end of the course is a certain amount of grade inflation, because those who do not write drop the course, and those who do write learn. (143)

When I remembered Murray's words, I felt no need to apologize because I had not come out with a bell curve for 47 advanced students. Indeed, I believed the portfolio evaluation system coupled with student self-evaluation had really helped my students learn. In fact, based on this experiment with advanced writers and my use of the system with average and remedial seventh graders, I am now as convinced as Murray that grading over time fosters success in learning regardless of student ability.

Murray says that he evaluated students on "accomplishment, subjectively, I admit, but to the standards I feel are appropriate to the course" (143). I, too, had evaluated my students on their accomplishments, which were considerable. I felt good about my students' progress, good because they were aware of and pleased with their

own growth, good because they felt positive about writing and about themselves. In fact, I was so satisfied with the results of my experiment that my colleague and I decided to adopt "going gradeless" for the next semester of Advanced Composition, right from the beginning.

On the last day of first semester, in a haze of fatigue from commenting on folders and completing grade sheets, I boxed the last of the student folders in preparation for writing this paper. On top of one box was the second "Are You a Writer?" sheet completed by Dave, a member of my fifth hour Advanced Comp class. His words gave me just the boost of adrenaline I needed to start the second semester. "I think that before I used to write," he said. "Now I am a writer."

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