



Students in the Advanced Media Writing and Communications class visit a filming of *Real Milwaukee*, a lifestyle show on Milwaukee's Fox 6 in 2019.

## GRADING

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students turned in.”*

# Performance review assessment proves valuable in the classroom

BY LAURA BENGIS

**M**anaging a student newsroom while balancing demands of added educational initiatives can seem like a never-ending tug of war. I'm fortunate to have worked in a district that produced publications as part of a class, but marrying our publication goals with new curricular focuses often left me stuck.

I wholeheartedly supported each one of these educational initiatives in isolation, but finding a way to apply them in my journalism courses sometimes felt like a stretch. Three years ago, I took a risk on a solution that ended up being the most impactful change I'd made in the classroom.

I stopped grading everything students turned in.

I had many concerns about what parents

would think, what administration would think, and how my high achievers would respond to fewer grades in the system. However, when rationalized with a discussion around growing educational trends and current research, there is simply no denying that this was the best thing I did for my journalism classes (and my other classes, too).

I implemented what I called a performance review assessment. Rather than calculate a student's grade from an average of scores on assignments throughout the semester, the student and I collaboratively determined a grade at each grading period. Yes, they received one singular summative grade in the gradebook.

The idea evolved out of many dinner conversations with my husband, a finance manager at a local Fortune 200 company. As we

recounted events from the day, I'd draw parallels between conversations he'd had with his coworkers and conversations I'd had with students. Deadlines, attention to detail, the ability to collaborate with others: Many of the skills I was working to instill in students were ones he discussed with employees, too.

He'd share information about his own annual performance review and how he and his manager reviewed yearly goals, evaluating progress and citing specific instances that supported growth in those areas. I thought, "There has to be a way to bring this authentic form of assessment into the classroom."

My district, Pewaukee School District (Wisconsin), tends to be progressive in terms of adopting effective trends in education. We were early adopters of standards-based grading and the workshop model in high school. Insight, the program my Advanced Media Writing and Communications course resided in, was a leader in creating authentic and relevant learning experiences centered in professional mentorship and real-world work projects.

The collection of initiatives we had adopted ended up being the perfect formula for a performance review grading model.

### STANDARDS-BASED GRADING

In 2015, the district moved to a standards-based grading system, placing a heavy focus on formative assessment that had little or no impact on the student's overall grade. I determined grades using summative assessments on specific standards. In language arts, we used the Common Core standards.

### THE GRADUATE PROFILE

Beyond academics, the Pewaukee School District recognizes the responsibility of educators to focus on soft skills as well as academics to produce truly future-ready students. With stakeholders such as students, parents, board of education members and higher education professionals, the district developed a "graduate profile" as a benchmark for all students to achieve by the time they leave the district.

Teachers are encouraged to include skills such as citizenship, cultural responsiveness, empathy and personal responsibility in lessons and learning activities. By nature, focus on these skills is often best achieved when engaging in activities that are authentic and relevant.

### THE WORKSHOP MODEL

While the workshop model is used more commonly at the elementary level in teach-

ing language arts, a small group of educators named Three Teachers Talk has had success using this method in the high school. After several professional development activities with this organization, the district implemented this curricular structure in all of the language arts courses at the high school.

One of the principles of the workshop model is that not every student needs to be engaged in the same activity at the same time. Students often are reading different books, working on different pieces of writing or even working toward different standards. (It kind of sounds like a newsroom, doesn't it?)

This initiative was probably the most influential change in transitioning to the performance review grading model.

### EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

As part of professional development surrounding implementation of the graduate profile, we discussed *Visible Learning*, a book by John Hattie that synthesized results from over 800 studies about key factors that influence academic achievement. While various teaching methods and activities find their place on the list, the second-biggest influence on student achievement is "self-reported grades," a central piece to performance review assessment.

### PERFORMANCE REVIEW ASSESSMENT

Performance review assessment is a collaborative process involving setting goals and tracking progress on formative work completed throughout a course. It centers on setting goals that correspond with educational standards and communicating frequently about progress toward those goals.

#### 1. Set goals

During the introductory activities for a course, I had students complete an activity that touched on the standards for the course. I collected and scored this work based on our class proficiency scale. After this work was returned to students, students reviewed the values and determined one to three areas of growth to focus on.

When performance review assessment is used, students can achieve goals and set new goals continuously throughout the course. It's not uncommon for one student to cycle through five or six goals throughout a course, whereas another student may work toward only two goals for the entirety of the course.

#### 2. Build a portfolio

Much of the curriculum design remains

continued on page 29

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continued from page 28

consistent with curriculum that may have already been in place. Students learn concepts, engage in class activities, complete writing assignments and even complete tests/quizzes.

The major difference is that none of this work is recorded in a grade book. Sometimes, I would collect a writing assignment or quiz and score it, only to return it to the students for feedback. Other times, I would lead students through a self-assessment activity or have them engage in peer assessment. All scoring was done on the course proficiency scale, which students became familiar with throughout the course.

Students kept all work in a portfolio located in the classroom. I used plastic file boxes for each class, and each student had a hanging file folder to hold work.

### 3. Reflect and review goal progress

Following each assignment — especially larger writing assignments — students tracked their scores on a spreadsheet (like an informal grade-book) and reflected on their progress for each assignment. Prior to starting a new assignment, I engaged students in an activity that had them review their goals so they would be fresh in their minds while making a new attempt.

A critical part of performance review grading is having frequent small touch points. I built in time for quick conversations about assignments and progress toward goals during student work time, which sometimes occurred electronically.

### 4. Performance review assessment

Prior to a grading period, students would review all of the documents in their portfolio alongside a proficiency scale, reflecting on growth. Students would choose two or three representative pieces of work to bring to the conference as artifacts or evidence of growth.

Students and I would meet individually to review progress on their goal, discuss growth over time and review the specific pieces they had selected. Collaboratively, we determined a grade using the proficiency scale, and this would be their semester grade.

The fascinating thing is, 80 to 90% of the time, we were in alignment. In the rare instances where the student and I disagreed, I gave the student an opportunity to produce one or two new pieces of work that could support their evaluation. We'd set a future meeting and re-evaluate. Following the second meeting, I had no disputes.

### STUDENT SUPPORT

Support for this grading process was resounding, and the transformational impact of this grading system took many different shapes.

**The grades were incredibly accurate.** Math often played some funny tricks when averaging grades, and averaged grades didn't always seem to accurately represent what a student was able to do. Grades determined by conference and evidence from a portfolio were incredibly accurate and provided a crystal-clear picture of what a student was actually able to do.

**Students were invested in learning.** Especially among high achievers, grade chasing can take the place of striving to actually grow. Yet with goal-setting and conversation about growth, students adopted a growth mindset. When every assignment doesn't "count," students become more invested in the work rather than the score. They take more risks and think creatively when they know there isn't a box to fit in. The growth I saw in student learning was unlike anything I'd seen before.

**Conferences developed critical soft skills in students.** For many students, this was the first time they had had to advocate for themselves and speak articulately about their abilities. Preparing students with skills they'll likely need in a professional environment was a fringe benefit of this process.

**My focus shifted to the right place.** So much of my time that had been spent on grading articles and tallying assignment completion was now spent on conversing with students or planning more engaging learning activities. Getting out of the grading weeds was a breath of fresh air that I greatly needed. I felt reinvigorated as a teacher.

A newsroom models a professional setting. From our leadership structure to the business we're engaged in, our activities don't always resemble those in a traditional classroom. It wasn't uncommon to find some students working on one project, others starting something new, and someone else working on the same thing they'd been working on for weeks. This is a good thing, necessary for our publications.

By more closely modeling a professional assessment and growth model, the students — and I — were able to keep our focus on making good work and getting better at making that work. Then we let the work speak for itself in accurately reporting student achievement. ■