



## **Student Self Reflection:**

### **The missing link in the shift to more effective assessment and grading practices**

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#### **The Situation...**

During an evening of parent teacher conferences, when I was still a high school teacher in the Winneconne Community School District (WI), a parent approached me who was concerned about his child's grade; particularly, his child's assessment scores in the course, which accounted for 50% of his child's grade. As the parent took a closer look at his child's lowest test score of the quarter -- the Chapter 2 test, he blatantly asked, "What is it that my child doesn't know? What does he need to do to bring his grade up?" I knew the Chapter 2 test was given at least a month prior, and that it had already been returned to students, so there I sat, staring at the 65% that was glaring back at me in the gradebook. At that moment, I realized that I could not give this concerned child's parent a reasonable answer. As the parent sat patiently, I started to fumble for words, in an attempt to generate a meaningful response, but could not recall specifics about the child's assessment, and instead, focused on the next grading period. As the parent left, it left me feeling unsettled. I could see the look of disappointment and frustration on the parent's face and could not shake the feeling of helplessness. As an educator, I felt I should have had an answer for that parent on the spot, but did not. From that moment on, it became a passion and mission for me to find the answer to the question that was burning inside, "How can I make assessment and grades meaningful, while accurately communicating learning to all parties involved at any given time?"

## **The Journey...**

Moments and conversations like the previous example led our district through a six year journey of exploring our grading and reporting practices. Although we now implement a Target Based Grading (TBG) system, it took years of conversations, debating, research, and a great deal of trial and error.

The first step of our exploration was having teacher teams prioritize the standards. We then took apart the standards to gain a deeper understanding of what our students needed to know and do. This led us to realize that many of the standards were broad and would be hard to teach and assess. We decided to break down our standards into learning targets. Our evolution led us to scoring each of the targets with equal weight, and only counting the most recent score on a target as part of the grade. We based our system on the four principles of Target Based Grading:

- 1) Formative practice no longer counts in grade calculation and is feedback only.
- 2) Reassessment is standard practice in every classroom (without penalty and often mandatory).
- 3) Removal of non-academic factors from grades and reported on these factors separately from academic achievement scores.
- 4) Proficiency levels are determined against clearly articulated learning targets as the basis for how a student is performing within courses.

## **The Transformation...**

Part of our TBG journey led us to examine our assessments. We knew that this needed to be a priority. Before TBG, our assessments were primarily organized by the type of question being asked and a majority of the questions were selected-response questions, not constructed-response questions (**Figure 1**).

We (Winneconne) quickly realized that a traditional approach to assessments did not offer us the ability to know, and efficiently communicate what our students knew and did not know about a particular topic. If we did not know what our students were struggling with, how could we help them and plan meaningful instruction? As we dug into our assessments, it did not take us long to recognize that the score on assessments were merely a percent of points earned, not a measurement of where a student was, relative to a target. In addition, using selected-response questions allowed our students to simply guess the answer, which meant that their scores on assessments would not reflect their knowledge on the topic, but instead, were merely a lottery of choice. While these traditional assessments were quick and easy to administer and grade, the score placed on the top did not give us any valuable data about student learning.

Deep discussions starting at the administration level, then small group discussions with staff, and finally, all staff, took place. It was clear that our assessments needed to change. How they needed to change was the bigger question. We wanted to be able to provide more specific and meaningful feedback to our students, parents, and ourselves. It was at this point that we decided to align our assessments to individual learning targets (**Figure 2**). We felt that if we could align assessments to learning targets and report out on each individual target, we would finally have the ability to accurately communicate proficiency to all parties at any given time. Within this new structure of assessment, each learning target received its own score against a proficiency scale. Each score was then entered separately into the gradebook/student information system.

Aligning assessments and grading by individual learning targets created positive outcomes for all stakeholders involved. The shift has allowed us to communicate very specific information with our students about their progress and where they currently are in their learning journey.

This transformation has allowed us to meet each student where they are, and focus on exactly what each of them needed - *a true form of personalized learning*.

The data collected from the assessments gave us more information than we ever anticipated. We were able to look at an assessment or directly in the gradebook at any given time and know exactly what our students (class or individual) were successful on, or still struggling with. It has also given us insight as to what topics we may need to spend more time on and reteach. As soon as we provided feedback to our students on a learning target from an assessment, we knew immediately what portion of the class was proficient on that target. If all of the class was proficient on the learning target, we knew that we could move on because we knew that we did not need to spend more time on something, which allowed us to focus on the more difficult learning targets. The new assessments took longer to give feedback and report out on, but the benefits significantly outweighed the time challenge.

After adjusting assessments, we thought we had “made it.” Although we saw significant increases in student learning and a cultural shift towards chasing learning vs chasing grades, we weren’t seeing the size of shift for which we were seeking. Something was still missing.

### **The Added Adjustment...**

As educators, we remain very aware of the power of self-reflection and reflection of our own learning, but we wondered how we could pass this on to our students. Our priority was to get our students to learn, but if we could get them to reflect on their own learning, and to take ownership of their learning, we could take their learning to a whole new level. The missing link was *student self-reflection* on learning.

We started with self-reflections embedded within assessments. We asked students to determine their proficiency level after they finished the questions for each learning target. **(Figure 3)**

It did not take long for us to realize the benefits of embedded student self-reflection. After the first assessments, we found that students were typically harsh in their reflections, which led to great conversations. We found it equally interesting when students perceived a higher proficiency level than how they performed. These reflections turned into great discussions about misconceptions. Following assessments and self-reflections, we took it a step further and began asking students to continue reflecting through writing, by identifying their understanding on specific learning targets. The purpose of this deeper self-reflection was to ask our students to be specific about each “approaching” and “needs support” target, which required them to be specific about their learning misconceptions. **(Figure 4)**

### **The Response...**

The responses we received from students were eye-opening. **(Figure 5)** Asking students to reflect on how they prepared for the assessment allowed us to have conversations about various study strategies. We found that often, students did not know different strategies they could use to prepare for assessments. This feedback led to specific conversations with students about how they may have to prepare differently for a science assessment than a social studies assessment. Another powerful area of the student self-reflection was when students had to explain the learning targets for which they lacked proficiency. It was evident after the first reflection that we needed to teach students how to reflect on their learning. While their responses took some time to develop, once they were able to accurately reflect on their learning, their reflections became a necessary piece in their re-learning process. We found that if students could determine their own misconceptions in their learning, they had a better chance of developing a more solid understanding of the learning target.

Without the self-reflection piece, the likelihood of these conversations would have been minimal. These conversations opened the door to more meaningful dialogue with students regarding their learning. We saw that it helped give students more ownership and responsibility in their learning which resulted in closing gaps. When we think back on the parent asking the question at the parent teacher conference, “What is it that my child doesn’t know? What does he need to do to bring his grade up?” Not only can we answer this question as educators, but most of our students can now answer this question for themselves.

## Figures

Figure 1: [Assessment not aligned to learning targets](#) (screenshot first page only)

Figure 2: [Assessment aligned to learning targets](#)

Figure 3: Embedded student self reflection

Circle the rating that best describes your ability to meet this specific target. I want you to self-assess. Where do you think you are based on the questions asked? Circle one.

Proficient (You Got It!)	Approaching (Almost Got It!)	Needs Support (Not Quite Yet!)
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Figure 4: [Student self reflection](#)

Figure 5: Self reflection responses from students.

[Sample 1](#)

[Sample 2](#)

## About the Author:

*Becky Pepler is the Director of the Learner FIRST Center for Assessment and Grading. She has 15 years of professional experience in public education, working in the Winneconne Community School District in northeast Wisconsin. Becky is currently a 6-12 Instructional Coach*

*with a focus on supporting teachers in the classroom on a daily basis. Prior to her role as an instructional coach, Becky taught Chemistry and Forensic Science. Becky has helped the Winneconne Community School District transition to Target Based Grading at the middle and high school levels.*