Implementing Standards-Based Grading in the University Classroom

Do My Practices Align With My Professed Beliefs About Assessment?

Kristina J. Doubet

Assessment | Feedback | Standards-based Grading | Student Growth

Standards-Based Grading (SBG) is the practice of assigning and reporting grades "…based on student achievement by standard rather than… traditional letter grades (Westerberg, 2016, p.5). Unlike traditional grading practice – typically collecting grades for assignments measuring multiple (sometimes non-academic) criteria – SBG advocates chronicling only students' mastery of key standards. As a teacher-educator, I endorse SBG in K-12 education because of its potential to promote equity in grading practices (Munoz & Guskey, 2015). Unlike most of my pedagogy, however, I do not fully implement SBG – or practice what I preach - in my own assessment courses. A feeling of hypocrisy over this disconnect weighs on me as the schools with whom I partner ask for my help implementing SBG. In an effort to quell that unease, I embarked on this self-study to implement SBG in my assessment course with the goal of discovering if I truly believed in its merits enough to recommend it for both university and K-12 settings. My findings indicate that I do find it worthwhile and I do recommend if for both settings; however, I recommend caution in implementation as it is a high-order change that brings with it disruption to norms and practices for both instructor and students.

Introduction

Standards-Based Grading (SBG) is the practice of assigning and reporting grades "…based on student achievement by *standard* rather than, or in addition to, traditional *letter grades* [emphasis added]" (Westerberg, 2016, p.5). It transforms the classic gradebook – typically featuring grades for assignments measuring multiple criteria, including non-academic factors such as late or missing work – into one that chronicles students' mastery of individual key standards. A standards-based gradebook may still report student performance on an assignment, but that assignment will be broken down into the standards it encompasses, with student performance on each of those standards reported in terms of level of mastery rather than simply as points (Guskey & Bailey, 2010; O'Connor, 2018). Imbedded in the system of SBG is a "mastery" approach to learning, which provides students with timely feedback on their performance and the chance to submit (or resubmit) work that demonstrates growth in that particular standard (O'Connor, 2018). Because a standards-based grade reflects the most recent evidence of student mastery while eliminating compliance and behavior from the equation, it is regarded as a more valid, reliable, and equitable evaluation of student performance than a traditional grade (Guskey & Bailey, 2010; Muñoz & Guskey, 2015; O'Connor, 2017; O'Connor et al., 2018; Welsh, 2019). While I *say* I believe in the promise of SBG and include it as a topic of study in my university assessment course, I have not yet used

it myself. This dissonance between my professed values and my explicit practices has prompted me to wonder: "Do I, indeed, believe in standards-based grading? Can I say I support a system when that system is not reflected by my own evaluation practices?"

Context

I teach graduate and undergraduate courses in differentiation and assessment for preservice teachers at my university and have authored numerous publications/ consulted with practicing teachers on topics such as formative assessment and performance-based assessment. Although my assignments and rubrics for all courses – and for the examples I feature in my publications and consultations – are aligned to standards, I have yet to truly embrace standards-based evaluation in my gradebook, study how systematically I address my professional InTASC (Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium) standards in my assignments or invite my students to reflect on their own mastery of those standards. I assign one grade for multiple competencies rather than separate marks for distinct performance factors. In addition, I include a professionalism grade (reflecting completion of readings and other compliance-based factors) in my evaluation of student performance, which – in K-12 teaching – would "contaminate" the grade by including "non-achievement factors" (O'Connor, 2017, p.1).

Aims

In 2021, a school with whom I partner as an instructional coach asked me to provide staff development around SBG for a pilot-group of teachers the following year. This gave me pause. Although I knew a great deal about SBG, and believed in its worth *in theory*, I lacked personal experience with its implementation. This left me feeling insecure about advocating for a system I had yet to adopt myself. Perhaps this is because I feel compelled to *model* the practices I advocate; I believe that if I want the pre-service and classroom teachers with whom I work to understand something, I must create opportunities for them to experience it first-hand (Hogg & Yates, 2013). This approach works with the curricular aspects of assessment; I can model the use of formative assessment to drive instruction, discuss the triumphs and pitfalls of designing performance-based assessment and rubrics to evaluate progress, and so on. I cannot, however, effectively model or champion SBG if I have not engaged in it myself.

This disconnect between my beliefs and practices shook my confidence in my ability to lead teachers in their work – I turned down the opportunity to provide staff development in SBG – but it awakened within me a desire to fully adopt SBG, to experiment with it in my own teaching. I believed it to be a more equitable approach to evaluating student achievement, as it assesses student mastery and eliminates non-academic factors that perpetuate bias and inequities for students of color and students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Muñoz & Guskey, 2015). I also understood it would entail a great deal of work to transform my traditional practices into this more progressive approach. I wondered, "Are my beliefs robust enough to withstand the extra time and effort it would take to implement this system?" Hence, for this self-study, I examined the fortitude of my beliefs and practices about SBG by implementing it in my undergraduate assessment course (for pre-service teachers) to discover whether I indeed held it worthy of advocacy for use both with university students and with practicing teachers in K-12 schools.

Methods

Because this self-study focused on examining my own beliefs and practices, my primary data sources included 1) artifacts I created for my class (e.g., a revised syllabus, new assignments and rubrics explicitly aligned to standards) and 2) a reflective journal I kept regarding the effectiveness of changes to those artifacts. In this journal, I recorded the changes I made each week regarding both assignments and assessments. I also debriefed in this journal about informal, in-class student reactions to being evaluated in standards-based fashion. The third source of data for the study consisted of more formal student reactions and reflections, (e.g., end of course reflections and conferences, student work). To facilitate the critical conversations necessary to self-study (Loughran, 2006), two colleagues from my department served as "critical friends" (Schuck & Russell, 2005), asking questions, introducing new perspectives, and challenging my interpretations.

Using qualitative content analysis (Patton, 2002), journal entries were divided into three groups: those referencing changes perceived as effective by the instructor, those referencing changes perceived as ineffective by the instructor,

and those simply reflecting on the instructor's growth or process (e.g., entries referencing confidence, doubt). Likewise, student reflections and work were separated into three groups: those reflecting favorable reactions from students, those reflecting critical reactions from students, and those reflecting unexpected impacts on student attitudes and progress. The next step was to sort data of both types into patterns that emerged. Guided by the themes surfacing from my analysis, I exited this self-study equipped to consider whether moving to SBG is a worthwhile pursuit for me at the university level.

Findings

Four clear themes emerged from my analysis of the data and constitute my findings: 1) the need to acknowledge and accommodate for the disruptive nature of change SBG entails for both instructor and students, 2) the importance of modeling SBG for pre-service teachers, 3) the feelings that the costs of SBG are worth the rewards, and 4) the need to re-evaluate SBG's notion of "non-academic factors" in the university setting.

Finding 1 - SBG Is Disruptive

The first theme emerging from my analysis is that SBG disrupts the traditional cycle of teaching and learning for both instructor and students; as such, both parties need to be able to process their feelings and frustrations as they navigate this significant change in practice.

I realized I would need encouragement to persist in this process the moment I began working on the syllabus. Typically, my assignment overview simply listed the major assignments along with their points and due dates (Figure 1). My SBG syllabus required me to breakdown assignments according to the standards to which they aligned and report how those standards would be assessed (a portion is depicted in Table 1).

Figure 1

Assignment Overview in Traditional Syllabus

Major Assignments

- Weekly Work Assignments (listed in the course calendar) – (**75**)
- Understanding-Based Pre-Assessment – (**50**)
- Formative Assessment Analysis – (**100**)
- Student-Constructed Exam Questions – (**50**)
- Grading Policies – (**50**)
- Alignment Guide – (**50**)
- Unit Plan Stage 1– (**50**)
- Unit Plan Stage 2 + Rubric – (**100**)
- Unit Plan Stage 3 – (**100**)

Table 1

A Portion of the Assignment Overview in SBG Syllabus

Assessment of Standards and Weight (235 points)	**InTASC Standards Assessed**
Standard 4a – Learning Goals and Standards for PBL Unit *Stage 1 of Project-Based Learning Unit (20)* - Due Week 5 - May be revised/resubmitted until Week 11	**Standard 4a**: The teacher understands the central concepts, tools of inquiry, and structures of the discipline(s) he or she teaches

Standards 4b, 5 and 6a – Assessment Instruments *Pre-Assessment Prompts (20)* - Due Week 6 - May be revised/resubmitted until Week 8 *Project-Based Learning Design (50 points)* - Due Week 9 - May be revised/resubmitted until the Final *Rubric Design (25)* - Due Week 9 - May be revised/resubmitted until the Final *Test-Question Construction (20)* - Due Week 10 - May be revised/ resubmitted until Week 12 *Formative Assessment Prompts (20)* - Due Week 11 - May be revised/resubmitted until Week 15	**Standard 4b**: The teacher…creates learning experiences that make aspects of the discipline accessible and meaningful for learners to assure mastery of the content. **Standard 5**: The teacher understands how to connect concepts and use differing perspectives to engage learners in critical thinking, creativity, and collaborative problem solving related to authentic local and global issues. **Standard 6a**: The teacher understands and uses multiple methods of assessment to engage learners in their own growth, to monitor learner progress

While this process deepened my understanding of my professional standards, one of the benefits of standards-based grading (Muñoz & Guskey, 2015), it was so time-consuming that – in the midst of it – I was tempted to throw in the towel and return to business as usual. I shared this struggle with my critical friends over dinner one evening, and they encouraged me to persevere while suggesting I change the course in which I was implementing it. I was planning to conduct this self-study in the graduate assessment course I teach every spring, reasoning that the course was familiar enough that adding an additional "layer" would cause less disruption than implementing it in the assessment course I was developing for our new undergraduate licensure program. But my friends were right; starting from scratch with a new course turned out to be less daunting than reconfiguring an existing course. To hold myself accountable, I volunteered to tie several assignments to the program's new portfolio project - its key assessment for accreditation. With my colleagues - and now my department - holding me accountable, I had no choice but to proceed.

If the syllabus was daunting to me, it was doubly so to my students when I introduced it to them in the first class, as evidenced by this entry in my reflective journal:

> *"Should have shared the alignment piece with them? I don't know. They did seem to appreciate the explicit invitation to revise and resubmit assignments; so, while the overview may have caused some of them stress at first glance, I think my emphasis on the revision policy ultimately caused most of them to breathe easier."*

Emboldened by this apparent acceptance, I proceeded with my plan to introduce the concept of SBG as implemented in K-12 schools by asking students to read an article about a California high school that adopted it in response to plummeting performance of their students during the pandemic. I was shocked by the pushback I received from students, and recorded some of the conversation in my reflective journal after class:

"This is just not reasonable. How many times can they retake the test before you have to move on?" remarked one student.

"We might as well throw out the whole system of schooling in the United States!" said another.

"Lots of kids – not me, but my friends who were really motivated by GPA in high school – would not like this at all!" explained another student, whose comment was met with much agreement from the rest of the class.

I took the opportunity to remind them of the reality that the fact that they were sitting in this classroom at a competitive university meant that grades worked for them. I reassured them that grades had worked for me, too, so that I understood their frustration. But I wondered if someone could give me a comment from the perspective of someone for whom grades hadn't worked.

"That's true – my practicum teacher last semester said that one of his students never had his homework because he got kicked out of their house and had to sleep in a hammock out back and had no light or anything."

I thanked the student and explained that SBG is not just being implemented in California; it is also being considered by a nearby county. This made a connection for a student whose sister attends school in that county, and she confirmed with an "Oh yeah…." as the rest of the class chuckled good naturedly.

We were able to end on a positive note as I assured them that I would prepare them for both "what is and what will be" in grading and assessment practices. I knew that I had my work cut out for me, though; the nature of this work will be discussed in Finding 2.

Finding 2 – SBG Must be Modeled

The next theme emerging from the data is the importance of modeling SBG for pre-service teachers. Alignment was the first step. For every rubric, the standard itself became the rubric criteria with descriptors outlining levels of expertise. This meant rearranging my rubric criteria to make them more skills-based than product-based. This is a journey I've already embarked upon because that is best practice in assessment; beginning with the standards just helped me do a better job of streamlining. It also communicated to students what standards they needed to work on the most. A portion of one standards-aligned rubric (for a project my students were to design for their own students) is featured in Table 2.

Table 2

Sample Standards-Aligned Rubric

Project Design Rubric

	Ready to Implement	Needs Some Revision	Redevelop

Standard 4b: Learning experiences make aspects of the discipline accessible for learners to assure mastery **Standard 6b:** Multiple methods of assessment guide decision making.	• Project is broken into manageable, meaningful chunks of instruction • Formative assessment is strategically planned at regular intervals to check student progress and make sure instruction is accessible. • The project includes ample opportunities for feedback, revision, and student reflection	• Project is broken into manageable OR meaningful chunks of instruction (not both) • Formative assessment is planned to check student progress. • The project includes some opportunity for feedback, revision, and student reflection	• Project is broken into chunks of instruction, but strategy is unclear • Insufficient formative assessment to check student progress. • Few opportunities for feedback, revision, and student reflection

Aligning tasks and rubrics to standards served as the basis for the rest of the modeling process: providing feedback to students based on their mastery of standards and allowing them to revise and resubmit based on that feedback. The rubric provided the criteria on which I could base my very specific feedback. While I've always allowed revisions, my realignment to standards caused me to redefine "expert". To truly demonstrate expertise in the standard as defined by InTASC (and not by me) reframed my conception of the term. As I reflected in my journal after grading the first assignment:

> *"SBG sounded horrible to students until they got their grades for their first assignment and realized they could revise and resubmit. Then they were all over it. Because my rubric took a mastery approach I didn't feel bad about not giving everyone an "expert" for their first try. They shouldn't be experts yet. I think back to the realization I had as I was creating the syllabus: expertise is grown not created. I think that really freed me up. Of course, I am NOT enjoying all the re-grading…. I've always done "revise and resubmits", but I've never had every student resubmit."*

Feedback, of course, is a topic of study in an assessment course. In this course, it fell late in the semester – week 11 – after students had submitted and received feedback on four major assignments. Students read jigsawed articles about the hallmarks of effective feedback and shared with their classmates in class, composing a master list within their collaborative groups. Before we discussed, I presented a few points not covered in their readings (e.g., the research on the impact of feedback versus grades). I was taken aback by their responses. My reflective journal records the following:

> *"They were a rapt audience. After experiencing the feedback all semester, they are believers. One student said (in response to study about comments vs. grades), 'I know I ignore comments in other classes. And I know we get grades in this class, but since they aren't final, and since we can always revise and resubmit according to your feedback, they don't feel like a permanent grade, so I actually read your feedback'." At a critical point in a long and toilsome semester, this felt like a victory. I was encouraged that the modeling of providing clear, specific, standards-based feedback had been so effective.*

Finding 3 – SBG Pays Off

The week we discussed feedback marked a turning point, both with the class and in my own attitude. Up until that point, I felt like I was swimming upstream. At that point, however, I felt, subtly, that students trusted me. I also looked at my newly configured SBG report and realized that I already had enough current information on the standards to eliminate the need for the final. I ran this idea by my critical friends first, and they agreed. That left me euphoric:

> *"I'm ditching the FINAL. It doesn't make any sense to have it. They have demonstrated their grasp of all the course standards in multiple assignments, with breadth and depth and growing levels of expertise. Those they didn't exercise multiple times they've had the opportunity to revise. Giving them another assignment*

is overkill. I DO want them to experience the joy I just did [in recognizing their growth], so I will hold individual conferences with each of them during finals week. They should come prepared to discuss the standard they feel the most confident in (with evidence) and least confident in (with goals). I will also ask them to note the area in which they've experienced the most growth. I want them to comb through the rubric criteria mapped to standards and see their scores on, say, Standard 4, increase from one assignment to the next."

My final meetings with students revealed that they, too, felt encouraged by the semester and proud of their growth. I asked that they complete a Google form answering the prompts described above to ensure they would be prepared for discussion and so that I could review their responses and reactions. I found it interesting that there were no discernable patterns in the assignments they cited as evidence for their ratings. Essentially, it reinforces the central premise of SBG; it matters less how or when you get there… just that you get there. And in the end, they all got there. One pattern that did emerge was students' pride in their growth, regardless of where that growth occurred, as evidenced by the following student comments:

…I originally received the lowest grade in the class [on the Stage 1 assignment] because I was unable to develop ways to connect my lesson to essential questions and student lives. I went through two separate revisions and would eventually earn an 18/20 on that assignment. Learning how to make essential questions that are broad enough to be applicable to other situations, while also being specific and targeted enough to be relevant to the lesson and students is a very tricky balance to achieve, but I believe that I have greatly improved at this over the course of the semester.

I think that I have most improved in my ability to create test questions. At the beginning of the semester, I created a Kahoot for my practicum class. Overall, it was a big mess and caused a lot of confusion because the questions did not align to the standards…. In my last practicum class, I asked students to answer multiple-choice questions that I had created [and it went great]. I think that the Test-Questions and FAA assignments clearly show that I have improved in my ability to ask questions...

In the beginning of the semester I struggled to come up with good ways to connect mathematics concepts to real life. It was hard to make it relevant to the students and the world. I had to revise my ideas multiple times, however I feel that I landed at a very creative real-world project-based task.

That these students are the same students who railed against the prospect of SBG is a wonder, and it reinforces the power of the practice for all students, including those at the university setting for whom traditional grading is a motivator.

Finding 4 – The University Caveat: "Non-Academic Factors"

One minor but important theme emerging from my study was my inability to maintain fidelity to SBG's elimination of "non-academic factors." In the university setting, I rely on students completing their reading assignments before they come to class. I cannot expose them to multiple and varied perspectives by spewing them from the front of the room. I traditionally assign a "Weekly Work" grade made up of an accumulation of points for students bringing reading notes to class each week. Since my assessment class is a methods class, not a lecture class, I could not reconceptualize teaching it without this preparation… and when I didn't check it, they didn't bring it.

Therefore, I added that category back into the syllabus, but called it "Professional Learning," InTASC Standard 9 which states, "The teacher engages in ongoing professional learning and uses evidence to continually evaluate his/her practice, particularly the effects of his/her choices and actions have on others". I explained that each class would begin with a "Professional Learning" activity; they could not participate unless they had completed their readings. Notes served as their ticket into the professional learning activity and comprised their professional learning points for the semester. This worked, but it caused me to work harder to make those professional learning activities meaningful. At one point, I expressed frustration in my reflective journal:

"I am running out of collaborative activities to use to exercise standard 9. I've used the matrix, debate team carousel, roundtable, graffiti, discussion board for peer review, and now I'm using jigsaw… for the third time. Structured Academic Controversy is on the way for the last week. I need more strategies in my arsenal that will justify me giving them – and grading - outside reading to fulfill standard 9."

> *I wonder, though, if I should have put myself under that kind of pressure. Yes, I wanted to model SBG for my students with as much fidelity as possible, but they are university students, not K-12 students. While I do believe SBG fits at the university level, perhaps this one area need not apply.*

Conclusion

This study offers an examination of an important concept in teacher education: Would a move to standards-based grading at the university level bolster professors' efforts to create more growth-centered classrooms for their students? I believe the answer is a resounding "yes." As one student explained in their final course evaluation "[SBG is] an excellent grading style where students can truly learn from their mistakes." This is what I would wish for every learner at every level; consequently, I am piloting a differentiation course for our undergraduate program and implementing SBG in that course, as well. But because it requires change on such a large level, I cannot implement it in all my courses at once. If I work with K-12 teachers to incorporate SBG into their practice, I will recommend the same as I would to university professors: 1) pilot it with one class before adopting it across the board; 2) prepare yourself and your students for what you are about to experience; 3) make sure you have support and accountability; and 4) release yourself from full-fidelity implementation, if needed. We still work within a system, and until the system changes, we will need to be flexible with ourselves and with programs like standards-based grading to meet our students' needs.

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Kristina J. Doubet

James Madison University