Evaluation & Grading: The final consideration for implementing the Minnesota K-12 art standards

". . . [T]he pursuit of grades dominates the lives of far too many students, and that the focus on grades still adversely affects the environment of too many classrooms."

Richard Stiggins, Judith Arter, Jan Chappuis, and Stephen Chappuis, *Classroom Assessment for Student Learning*

With relatively modest changes educators can improve grading practices because, according to Thomas Guskey and Jane Bailey in *Developing Grading and Reporting Systems for Student Learning*, we know more than ever what works and what doesn't (what is in fact even harmful to students) and how good evaluation practices can support student learning.   But we continue to use particular practices not because we've examined them closely and found them effective, but because they are part of a tradition that has gone unquestioned—by teachers, parents, students, and even the community-at-large—for years. However, as the goals of education become more complex, the need for better quality evaluation practices and more detailed communication about student learning and achievement becomes increasingly necessary.

In *Transforming Classroom Grading* Robert Marzano asks the question point blank, "What are grades for?" and then answers that question by stating that traditionally grades were meant or thought to serve five purposes: 1.) administrative purposes such as whether to retain or pass a student on—from grade to grade or even into post-secondary institutions, 2.) feedback for students about their progress or achievement, 3.) guidance to teachers for instructional planning, 4.) guidance to students about future work or educational plans, and 5.) motivation for students to improve.   Marzano goes on to say that there are at least three problems in the traditional classroom grading process that makes it highly ineffective:

- It allows—even encourages—teachers to include non-achievement information such as tardiness and behavior into grades that are supposed to reflect learning or achievement.
- It allows teachers to subjectively weight assessments.
- It mixes different types of learning—knowledge, skills, reasoning—into single scores on individual assessments.

Stiggins offers some guidelines to support teachers in re-thinking grading. He suggests:

1. Using assessment *for* learning information as descriptive feedback for student to improve achievement and not as a factor in report card or end of unit grades

2. Using the most current evidence of learning and level of achievement as the basis for a grade (not averaging from the beginning of a marking period)

3. Basing all grades on verifiably accurate assessments of student learning

4. Separating assessments *for* learning (formative), assessment *of* learning (summative) and student behavior data into different sections in the grade book

5. Arranging grade book entries according to learning goals rather than by assignments

6. Involving students in planning the assessment activities and evaluation criteria of their learning AND keeping them apprised of their current level of achievement with regard to learning goals.

Stiggins believes that for any evaluation of learning to have meaning the assessment activity or activities must be closely aligned and appropriate to the learning goals. Instruction must occur before those assessment activities and it must also be closely aligned to the learning goals to provide appropriate opportunities to support student learning. Without this close alignment of all the components—learning goals, instruction, assessment activities and evaluation criteria—any measure of student achievement level is invalid and meaningless.

Guiding Premises in Grading
- The primary goal of grading and reporting is *communication*
- Grading and reporting are integral parts of the *instructional process*
- Good reporting is based on *good evidence of student learning*

   adapted from *Developing Grading and Reporting Systems for Student Learning* by Thomas Guskey and Jane Bailey

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If we believe, as Guskey and Bailey state, that the primary goal of grading is communication, then Stiggins offers these conditions for effective communication:

1. **Learning goals are clear.** Everyone—teacher, student, parents— understands the particular learning targets and what they mean

2. **Information is accurate.** The information about student learning to be communicated is based on accurate assessment activities—appropriate to the learning goals, with multiple opportunities to learn and achieve and nothing—such as behavior, tardiness or *effort*--to distort or bias the results.

3. **Communication is tailored.** The communication is tailored to the audience—parents, students, administrators. What does each audience need to know and when do they need to know it?

4. **Code, language or symbols for communication are clear.** Each particular audience understands the meaning of the summary code, language or symbols for reporting level of achievement.

All this expert discussion and advice about evaluation and grading leaves those of us who work in classrooms with a number of questions.

- What are some effective ways to motivate students to practice and complete learning activities without grading everything?

- How do we motivate students if grades are not effective for that purpose?

- How do we balance assessment *for* learning with assessment *of* learning in the day to day work of the classroom?

- What evidence do we gather to show accomplishment of learning goals?

- How will we keep records of student achievement and which learning goals do we track?

- How will we summarize across assessment activities to come up with a composite score?

- What have we learned about evaluation and grading over the years and how can we use that knowledge to improve our classroom practice?

- What grading methods do work best?

These—and other questions about evaluation and grading we discover as we begin to investigate current practice—can become topics for classroom level inquiry and rich professional conversations. And they are the questions we need to answer as arts educators to fill in the final blank of implementing the Minnesota K-12 art standards.