What is a grade? We are all familiar with number grades. A number grade is just an arbitrary symbol. If I assign a student an 85 in a course, and another student a 53, is this reasonable to assign a grade like this? Does this really mean that the student who got the higher mark has learned more than the other student?

An analogy used in the textbook is an agriculturalist evaluating soil. There are 16 different dimensions of soil and each of those can be rated using 50 different criteria. How could the agriculturlist use a single number to evauluate the soil? There are too many variables involved. All soil is different, just like all students are different.

What do grades mean to students?

Students think of a grade as a reward for the hard work that they have put in. How can you accurately measure hard work? And is there relationship between hard work and actual learning? Do you think it’s true that that the student who has worked the hardest must be the student who has learned the most?

Growing up in the school system, students have been accustomed to being compared to their peers, and being ranked from best to worst. I remember in high school, when handing back tests, my teacher would start with the student with the highest mark and work their way down. What good is this information when determining how well we are performing? It may be better to use self referencing and have students compare how they are performing now to how they were performing in the past. Or criterion referencing and compare their progress to the standards they have set out for.

Instructors

The main reason we give percentage grades is that that is what schools, colleges, and universities want.

Grades allow us to rank students, to allow or deny entry to a program, to award prizes and scholarships, etc. Society understands numbers. Those grades don’t actually provide learners with any feedback on what they’re doing well or what they need to work on.

We need to recognize what purpose grades serve and also the limitations of them.