



2013-2014 NOII Case Study

School: Nakusp Secondary School **District:** SD10 Arrow Lakes

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Question / focus area: How does shifting from grade based assessment to the use of peer feedback, take away sheets, descriptive feedback and no quantitative marking improve student performance and promote ownership of learning?

Scanning: We have found that our students generally do not take ownership over their learning. They complete one assignment and move on to the next without internalizing the information or seeing its application beyond the classroom. This situation has been perpetuated by an industrial model of education, where students jump through hoops to an end destination without thinking about or valuing the process or journey.

Focus: Can students move beyond the receipt of a grade and find value in descriptive feedback? Will their quality of work and amount of effort improve? Do we need to quantify every piece of work submitted to accurately determine a grade for each student? We believe this matters because we are moving away from an industrial model of education where grades do not matter as much, and student ways of knowing are less easily quantified to a single number.

Hunch: Students generally do not reflect on their learning and apply their understanding to real world situations. They do not see the larger picture

New professional learning: We investigated the use of no grades, comment only feedback, and its application within a classroom. We continued to use portfolios in the classroom as a major form of assessment for learning.

Taking action: Assignments were directly related to the learning outcomes and presented as project based inquiries, action projects, labs, or summary summative assessments. Students received verbal or written descriptive feedback on these assignments. Portfolios were constructed for each term and these were used as assessment for learning to determine each student's grade in collaboration with the student.

Checking: Descriptive feedback and personalized inquiries were a success. We are very satisfied with the feedback from parents and students. We will continue and expand upon this concept in our other classes next year.

To indicate evidence of change and growth we surveyed students. At the beginning of the year there was resistance to the idea of not receiving grades. Students were continually trying to attain a number for their work, but we persisted with descriptive feedback on assignments and interim reports. For the first report card, where we had to submit a grade, we consulted with students and went over their feedback from the term and evidence of their learning in a portfolio. After reviewing their progress, we looked at the learning outcomes and determined a grade together that reflected their level of understanding.

By Term Two students were used to the idea and the work submitted in their portfolios improved based on the descriptive feedback they were getting. By the end of the year, students were submitting competent and complete work with all elements of labs and projects being covered, as opposed to previous years with grades and comments, where we would be seeing little improvement or change in student work over the course of the year.

At the end of the year we asked the students: "How has the use of projects, labs, and descriptive feedback, rather than tests and grades worked for you?" We received an overwhelming majority of favorable comments, though a number of students still wanted a grade, combined with descriptive feedback. We are not sure that we would go back to giving grades because often students don't look beyond the number. The fact that students found the class less stressful was excellent because we wanted to decrease the typical anxiety level of a high school student.

Below are some quotes from our students:

"Science, was so fantastic. Not having tests, no major stress, or freaking about studying, or worrying about tests it was stress free. Not having grades really helped, you would get a paper and have all positive feedback. It didn't make you feel bad about yourself, you didn't get marks it was just all good. The projects just were awesome. It made me work really hard, the projects were clear, and told us exactly what to do. Descriptive feedback really helped me. It showed me what I need to do, and what I could have done better. It never left you feeling bad about yourself."

"It made you feel a lot less pressured to get good grades because it's focused on helping you, not your mark. The projects make learning about everything a lot more enjoyable and creative. My science mark went up since last year and I think it's because of how detailed the responses were when we got projects/work back on how we could improve."

Reflections/Advice:

This inquiry supported the First People's Principles of Learning objectives:

- *Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place).*
- *Learning involves recognizing the consequences of one's actions.*

We hadn't considered anxiety levels in students when initiating this inquiry, but it has presented itself as an important issue and we will continue to focus on reducing anxiety next year. No grades also empowered students with learning difficulties to be given specific expectations or goals and do well. Making the change to no grades was a big leap and still is not in line with the report card system in the province, but it was more fulfilling for and useful to students. Based on their portfolios it was evident that the students learned more, were able to apply their learning, and realised the benefits of improving their work.