

Five Ways to Get Students Thinking about Learning, Not Grades

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By Maryellen Weimer,
PhD

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The past several decades have seen an interest in learning surge. It's always been part of our educational endeavors, but the recent focus on it has been intense—that is, for teachers. Our interest is not shared by most of our students. They are still pretty much all about grades, preferably those acquired easily. They will work for points, but not very enthusiastically, if at all, without them.

Grades are important; we can't say they don't matter. They're what gets students financial aid, job interviews, and admission to grad school. But in the larger scheme of life, grades don't matter all that much. When was the last time someone asked about your GPA? It's the knowledge and skills acquired in college that make a difference in what we do and how we live. Yes, grades are supposed to measure learning and they do, but not all that definitively.



Somehow we've got to get students more focused on learning and more accurately understanding what it requires. So many students still cling to the notion that grades measure ability, and that good grades result from big brains, not time and effort devoted to study. How do we make the point that IQ matters far less than the commitment to hard work?

Most of us aren't naïve enough to imagine whole bunches of students being converted to learning enthusiasts simply because we so convincingly proclaim that it matters. We need to be thinking more along the lines of water droplets eroding rock with a slow and steady drip, drip, drip. Forward movement too slow to see, but powered by a relentless commitment to reposition thinking about grades and learning. Here are five ideas that illustrate these less splashy ways of advancing the learning agenda.

1. **Assignments as learning opportunities** – For most students, assignments are tasks they do please the teacher. We hear that when they ask what we “want” in the paper, project, or presentation. What if we introduced every assignment by discussing the knowledge and skills it advances? Or we could put the question to students, “What might you learn by doing this assignment?” and constructively be in their faces until they answer.
2. **Learning reflection** – Students need to move beyond the “Whacha get?” exchange when we return graded work. Here’s an interesting approach one teacher uses. Early in the course, he asks students to think about their professional destination or even the kind of life they hope to live one day. “What skills and knowledge are you going to need that you don’t have or don’t have enough of?” Students make a list (yes, they get a few points for doing so) and they keep it handy. After every assignment or activity, they look at the list and write a short reflection on how what they just did supports what’s on their list.
3. **Evolving assignments** – Most assignments, activities, and even exams are something students do once and then move on to the next task. One-time assignments don’t illustrate how learning is an evolving process and they don’t teach students how to do more work on something they have already done. Let’s rethink that approach with a paper written in installments, or a reaction to one reading, followed by a reaction to a second in light of comments made about the first, and so on. Installments in a single document are submitted every time a reaction is due. There’s teacher feedback (not necessarily every time) but no grades. The need-to-know on the grade front is calmed by announcing that everyone has at least a B unless they hear otherwise. The paper is graded once, at the end, with a few summary comments.
4. **Better collaboration with peers** – Students go to peers with lots of learning related questions: “Who should I take for econ?” “Were her tests hard?” “Is that a class you can skip?” Unfortunately, these aren’t particularly good questions. Students can learn important things from peers but they’ve got to ask better questions. How can we help them to ask better questions when they’re deciding whether to take a course?
5. **Change the conversation** – Talk “learning” with students. I once had this exchange with a student. “So, you’re taking political science? Tell me what you’re learning in the course.” To which the student replied, “Nothing.” “Really?” I asked incredulously. “And what’s going to happen when you’re interviewing for the job of your dreams and the interviewer says, ‘Gee, I see you took a poly sci course. That’s such an interesting field. Tell me what you learned in that course?’” I loved how the student’s eyes widened.

The idea for this list came to me after rereading a *Journal of Education for Business* article, which contains a list of recommended practices for learning-centered classes. The ideas shared in the article are related to, but not the same as, my list here.

Farias, G., Farias, C. M., and Fairfield, K. D., (2010). Teacher as judge or partner: The dilemma of grades versus learning. *Journal of Education for Business*, 85, 336-342.

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