

Group Grades Are Pointless

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The issue of group grades will not go away. Judging by recent mail, comments on the Internet, and comments by teachers at workshops, it is a hot topic. A few days ago in a follow-up to a posting I made on the Kagan Question and Answer Discussion Board, I received an E-mail letter regarding group grades:

Dear Mr. Kagan,

In your response, you suggested that I should never give my students group grades since this allows lazy students to get a "free ride". Browsing on the internet, I happened to find a very interesting page by a University Teacher at North Carolina State University. This man and some of his colleagues are working with your approach and they report having obtained excellent results with it. What is curious is that they strongly suggest giving students group grades. They include suggestions on how to deal with group assignments (asking students to rate their participation by means of percentages, or allowing groups to fire noncooperative members after one or two warnings). Group grades and individual grades are both considered and students may fail the subject if they do not work well in groups. What do you think about this?

Yours sincerely,

Miss Mariela Basante

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My heart goes out to sincere educators seeking the best for their students. What a noble profession: Individuals expending their time, energy, and love attempting to give the best gifts they can to their students. The job of a teacher is extraordinarily complex: In their search for excellence, teachers will find experts who give opposite advice. Some advocate group grades, others, like myself, feel they should never be used.

What I will attempt to provide here is not just an argument against group grades, but also a stimulus

to rethink grading itself. In the process, the problems with group grades and their inadequacy comes into sharper focus. In the big picture, as we redefine and broaden our roles as educators, we will find group grades pointless. They are not a useful tool in realizing our mission as educators for the 21st century. More importantly, the analysis points the way toward a far more differentiated assessment and grading system.

The question of giving group grades, though, will never be resolved in one way once and for all for all educators. Thoughtful, intelligent, well-intended educators can and do settle on opposing sides on this issue. When I hear about students firing other students or failing courses because their group did poorly, it makes me cringe. To others these ideas are appealing. Education is an art as well as a science, and what works for one may not work for another. Overall, it is to the good of students that different educators adopt very different teaching practices because it broadens the experience base of students. And experience is a great teacher. If all teachers taught exactly the same way, students would receive a very narrow education. So I am in favor of all teachers flowering in their own way — becoming the unique teacher it is in them to be. That is one of the reasons I have developed and advocate so many different instructional strategies and structures. Each teacher gravitates to a different set of structures, and overall this is to the benefit of students because regardless of the content there is a different kind of learning which occurs as a function of the instructional strategies used. Education as a field is becoming increasingly aware of the hidden or embedded curriculum inherent in instruction; curriculum and instruction are not as distinct as we once thought. Said another way: How we teach is to a large extent what we teach. Thus students will learn a great deal more if teachers each adopt different methods.

Although we are enriched by variety, some methods are not good for students and not good for education. Group grading is one such method which should be abandoned. Although variation creates a colorful, rich garden, we must rid the garden of some weeds if the garden is to remain healthy.

For years I have been telling teachers why I believe group grades are a bad practice. My arguments have been laid out in some detail in various articles including articles in *Educational Leadership* and *Learning Magazine*:

Kagan, S. **Group Grades Miss the Mark.** *Educational Leadership*, 1995, 52(8), 68-71.

Kagan, S. **Avoiding the Group-Grades Trap.** *Learning*, 1996, 24(4), 56-58.

In those articles I tried to show that:

Group grades are...

- 1. Unfair**
- 2. Debase report cards**
- 3. Undermine motivation**
- 4. Communicate to students that their grade is a function of forces beyond their control**
- 5. Violate individual accountability**
- 6. Create resistance to cooperative learning, and**
- 7. Are or at least should be illegal.**

I won't detail those arguments in full again here. Much of my argument, though, is clear from a simple thought experiment:

With group grades, two students with identical ability, work, motivation, and learning end up with quite different grades!

A Thought Experiment

Much of the argument against group grades is provided by a simple thought experiment. In our experiment we will imagine two identical students. Of course, in reality no two students can be identical. But for purposes of this simple thought experiment we will imagine two students who are identical with regard to ability, motivation, the work they perform, and the learning they achieve.

Now we place these two imaginary identical students in different groups in a class which uses group grades. Both students work hard and contribute the same amount to their respective groups. One of these two identical students happens to end up in a group with very motivated students whose skills compliment each other well. They function well together as a group. Naturally, their group project is excellent and they all receive a top grade. The other of the two identical students happens to end up on a group with unmotivated students, or teammates who dislike each other, or students who are in a power conflict, or students whose abilities or styles simply don't mesh well. Their group project naturally suffers and they all receive a much lower grade. In our thought experiment two students with identical ability, work, motivation, and learning end up with quite different grades!

Roll of the Dice! To the extent group grading is in place, the report card grade of an individual student is no longer a function of the student's individual ability, motivation, and performance. Group grades make individual grades a function of chance factors, factors out of the control of the student. Group grades make individual grades to some extent a roll of the dice!

Unfair. Students and their parents know that situations like the one in our thought experiment actually occur. They know group grades are often unfair.

Resistance. Group grades create resistance to cooperative learning among students and their parents. Parents of high achieving students do not want their student to receive a lower grade because a member of their child's team failed to perform well. These parents and students rightfully resist having a student in a situation of obvious unfairness — a situation in which each student receives a grade based in good measures on the performance of others. Hundreds of parents — many of them teachers — have complained to me about group grades. They tell horror stories that their son or daughter has had to do most or even all of the work for the group because the group had members who were putting their energy elsewhere.

Undermine Motivation. Group grades undermine the motivation and learning of many low-achieving students: They know they can get a grade even if they do nothing at all. Motivation of high achievers is undermined as well because they do not want to give their fullest effort to a project when others are taking a free ride.

Learned Helplessness. When group grades are in place students are, to some extent, in a situation of learned helplessness. What they get is not a function just of what they do, but rather chance forces — who they happen to be on a team with, how well they get along, how motivated the other students are. When we know that our outcomes to some extent are independent of our efforts, our motivation goes down.

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Illegal. To the extent grades help determine who gets into the college of their choice and who does not, we cannot defend a grading system which gives students with identical learning and performance different grades. If taken to court, I would hope the judge would declare any such grading system illegal. Why? Because it is a system in which a student's grade, to a large extent, is

not a function of what they have learned or produced, but based rather on undefined and chance forces such as group dynamics and the ability, motivation, and performance of others.

Much more can and has been said about the problems created by group grades. Rather than reviewing the arguments here, let's focus on three questions: Why do group grades persist? Why Grade? Why are Group Grades inconsistent with our broadened mission as educators for the 21st century?

Why Do Group Grades Persist?

If group grades so often create resistance, complaints, and obvious unfairness, why does the practice persist?

Powerful forces serve to maintain the practice of group grades, including inertia, and false and unanalyzed assumptions.

Inertia. In workshops across the United States and in other countries when Kagan trainers state our opposition to the use of group grades, in some parts of the world there is very heated opposition. I gave a training at a technical college in which group grading was a primary source of grades for students. When I stated my opposition to the practice, the participants offered a very heated defense of the practice. Recently Laurie Kagan gave a training at a high school in which many teachers use group grades. She experienced the same angry reaction when she stated our opposition to group grading. This is understandable. If teachers have long used a practice, are comfortable with it, built lessons around it, include it as an element of lesson planning, naturally they will not readily agree with someone saying the practice is a bad idea. If you are practiced and comfortable with an educational method and it works well for you, you are not predisposed to give it up. If you are a teacher now comfortably using group grades, I would ask only that you keep an open mind. Read this article. Consider my comments here and then ask yourself why really you need group grades. Ask if group grades are the best way for you to reach your objectives as an educator. Perhaps, take the next step. The next time you do a group project, tell the students that their group will receive feedback on the project, but all individual grades will be based on what students have learned or created.

After all, why are we having students do projects? Is it not for learning? How can we know and how can they know if the learning has occurred if we do not assess them individually? Adding a group grade is pointless.

False Assumptions. Almost thirty years ago, I developed Co-op Co-op. It is a cooperative learning method in which each student team has a different topic related to the class unit, and each student on each team has a unique "mini-topic" — a part of the team topic. Each student researches his/her mini-topic, returns to the team to present, and then the team synthesizes the material for a presentation to the class. When I first developed Co-op Co-op, I included three sources of grades. An individual grade based on each student's write-up of his/her individual mini-topic, a group grade based on the quality of the team presentation as determined by the class, and a teammate grade based on the contribution of the team member, as determined by his/her teammates. Co-op Co-op worked very well in my upper-division university classes and many students said it was the best learning experience of their university careers. Co-op Co-op was later adopted successfully at all grade levels across the range of content areas. In my university classes I did not get complaints about the group grades or the teammate grades, and I used the method in that form for a number of years, with many classes.

But something was bothering me. I knew that if teammates really liked an individual they were likely to give them a better grade, regardless of what the student had learned. I knew also that some unmotivated and low achieving students were getting a boost, however slight, from the group grade. Group grades are always an unfair reflection of individual achievement or performance because they do not reflect only the learning or performance of the individual who received the grade.

So with some trepidation I changed what had been a very successful course. The next time I offered the course I announced that at the end of the projects there would be structured feedback to each student from their teammates regarding their contributions to the team, but that the teammate feedback would not be figured into the course grade. I announced also that there would be a formal evaluation of each project by the class along several dimensions, but that the group evaluation also would not figure into the course grades for individual students. Grading would be based only on individual performances (mini-topic write-ups, and other individual assessments of what students had learned).

I was worried about the shift in the structure of Co-op Co-op because I knew that individual students

could decide not to contribute at all to their group's project and still get an excellent grade. Given that many upper-division undergraduate students have a heavy course load, I thought some might reason that if the group project was not to get a grade, they would put their efforts elsewhere.

To my surprise and pleasure, the group projects that year were better than ever. I had been operating on a false assumption! I had assumed that the great projects I had been seeing each quarter in my classes were partially a result of group grades -- that students were motivated by the grade. In fact, students were more motivated without the grade. They made comments like, "I wanted to do the best job I could for my teammates," "We wanted to really show the class how well we could teach." "It was a relief to know we were all working together to learn rather than for just for a grade."

I realized that I was operating for years under a false assumption. I had assumed I needed grades to motivate students. The students showed me they were more motivated by being valuable to others; learning; accomplishing a challenging task; knowing one is working to realize one's own goals, not for an external reward; and feeling pride in one's ability. When students see themselves as working for a grade they do not develop as much intrinsic motivation as when they see themselves as working to learn or to be of service to others.

If you are presently using group grades successfully, try an experiment: Keep the group projects, but substitute structured peer and teacher feedback for group grades. In my experience, detailed feedback is just as motivating as a grade, without introducing the inherent unfairness of giving individuals grades partially based on the performance of others.

Unanalyzed Assumptions. On the David and Roger web page this last week, Roger Johnson replied to a question about group grades as follows:

A teacher writes:

I have been teaching (and using co-operative learning) for 10 years. I have always used group marks as part of the process. I recently read an article from Spencer Kagan saying group marks should not be used. What are the benefits and the downside of using group marks from your perspective.

Roger Johnson replies:

The question of grades and cooperative learning always comes up and there are several variables to consider:

Group grades follow group goals and give a strong message of Positive Interdependence. Students who are veterans of cooperative learning prefer group grades as they insist that everyone contributes in a different way and there is no way to sort it out except to share the mark.

Teachers new to cooperative learning sometimes are challenged before they are ready to defend the use of cooperative learning if they give group grades so we usually advise rookies to not give group marks on serious material instead to prepare each other on the test and project and take the test or defend the project alone. This is not a bad procedure as individual accountability is part of the cooperative learning group (learn it in the group and be able to demonstrate it alone). On the other hand our veterans (and you would fit that category by the sound of it) use group grades whenever it is more appropriate to do so and have no difficulties explaining it to questioners.

Perhaps the best system is a mixture of group project and individual test grades. It doesn't change the top people much but it increases the number at level two and three and leaves almost no one at the bottom levels.

I have a great deal of respect for Roger and David Johnson. They represent a very powerful positive force in the history of education — their contributions world-wide are profound and enduring. I do think, though, there are some important unanalyzed assumptions in Roger's response.

When I hear people talk about "sharing the mark," the image that comes to my mind is of sharing the rewards for hard or clever work. The embedded assumptions seems to be, first, that the mark is the payoff for what we have produced together and second, that there should be a mark. But if we want to create learning communities, learning, not grades, is what we should be sharing. The reward for group work should be enhanced knowledge and skills, not a grade. I want to see students more proud of what they have learned than what grade they received. If the focus is on grades, our learning community is off base. If we have a true learning community, adding a group grade to a successful project is pointless, excess unnecessary baggage. Why focus students on an external source of evaluation if our aim is to have them self-evaluate and celebrate their own learnings?

Roger concludes by stating that perhaps the best system is a mixture of group projects and individual test grades. But there is no reason to assume that group projects should be associated with group grades. In the structural approach to cooperative learning we do successful group projects all the time, but never with a group grade. Team Statements, Send a Problem, Buddy Books, Pairs Compare and many other structures include completing a project, but there is never a group grade. Students eagerly engage in those structures not for a grade, but because they are

motivating, challenging, and produce learning. When we have engaging curriculum and instruction we do not need grades to motivate projects.

Why Grade?

What should be the function of grades?

If we want to motivate learning, engaging curriculum and instruction are our best tools, not bribing students with grades.

Not for Motivation. A number of years ago I gave a workshop and the teacher objected that if he eliminated grades his students would never do their work. I said, let's go into your class and see if it is true. He was teaching math and the class typically spent hours each working alone on worksheets, turning them in for a grade. The worksheets each contained a number of problems of the same type. I immediately realized the teacher was right. If you have boring, unmotivating curriculum and instruction, you need grades to bribe students to do the work! When we introduced exciting instructional strategies and embedded the math problems into contexts which were interesting to the students, we found they eagerly learned with no need for grades on the worksheets.

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Not to Rank Students or Groups. In a class with eight teams, if we recognize one best group we simultaneously create seven "second-best teams." This is not a good ratio of winners to losers. While in the short run between team competition may motivate teams, soon teams who have not won begin to lose motivation. What in the short run is motivating, in the long run undermines motivation. The individual student who never gets top marks learns to save face by saying, "I didn't really try." So, too, do some teams when ranked one against another. Grading on a curve sets teams against one another; it creates negative interdependence so the gain of one team is the loss of another. Many students are nervous before presenting a project. To the extent the grading system contributes to that nervousness the grading system is not brain-compatible — it has caused downshifting away from states associated with optimal learning.

For Communication. If the function of grades is not to motivate students and not to rank students, why use them? I think the legitimate function of grades is communication. If used carefully, grades can be useful to communicate how much a student has learned or how well they have performed. Parents, colleges, future teachers and, most importantly, students themselves can make good use of this information. Grades can tell us what we have learned and what we have left to learn. But if communication of performance level is the primary function of grades, then grades should not even partially be a function of what someone else on a group has done. Grades should be based on individual performance.

What is Our Mission as Educators?

Our mission as educators is to help students to realize their potential. Educators world-wide are broadening their view of education, realizing that we do the greatest good for students and society when we foster the development of the whole student, all of their intelligences, many types of higher-level thinking skills, their emotional literacy, their character, and their social skills. As we move into this broader definition of education, fostering development along many dimensions, our grading and assessment systems will have to become far more differentiated.

Let's take an example. We might have three objectives as we have students working on a math project as a group: We want them to develop content mastery, higher-level thinking skills, and social skills.

How will we know and how will we let our students know the extent to which the objectives have been reached? To give students one grade as a group and have all the students share that grade communicates very little to the students or others. The group grade fails to distinguish who did what, and further it fails to inform students and others how much of the content has been mastered, what thinking skills have been developed, and in what ways as a result of the project students are more socially skilled. Assessments of learnings along each dimension for each student would be very informative to us as teachers, letting us know the extent to which each of our objectives have been reached. It would lead to improved educational practice. It would be informative and useful to the students as well. In contrast, lumping the performance all students along all dimensions into one grade leads only to ranking groups, not improving instruction. It fails to inform us and our students how well we are reaching our various objectives — what we can celebrate and what needs

improvement.

As we increasingly assume our new broader mission as educators, we will have to develop far more differentiated approaches to assessment and grading. Group grades, because they lump so many dimensions into one grade, will be found to be uninformative, pointless. In the 21st century we will move away from an outcome orientation. We will be less concerned with trying to rank students and grade them. We will move toward a process orientation. We will be more concerned with helping students make the next step in their development along various dimensions. Learning, not grades, will be the reward as we celebrate with students each new learning in an ongoing process of performance and feedback. One of the reasons I like cooperative learning structures so much is that they allow teachers to engage in an ongoing assessment and feedback process with students. Whenever a teacher is using a cooperative learning structure the teacher is free to observe and/or interact one-on-one with students. This ongoing assessment process informs and enriches both the teacher and the students. When that type of learning community is in place, group grades are truly pointless.

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