



Chasing Points or Chasing Learning: A Shift in Focus

"How many points
is this worth?"

"Are you going to
grade this?"

"Can I do
something for
extra credit?"

These were questions I repeatedly heard from my students. Maybe you've heard them too. They weren't trying to be difficult. They were just doing what they had been conditioned to do – to use points to understand the value of their work. Somewhere along the way, we unintentionally taught students that success in school was more about collecting points than learning. Of course, that was never our goal. But when points and grades become the focus of our conversations with students, the importance of learning becomes secondary.

During a meeting, a group of teachers reflected on new grading practices they experimented with this year, sharing how things were going. After a brief pause, one teacher spoke up. "I'll share," he said, "but I'm not sure if it's been successful." He explained that he shifted from using varying point totals for assignments and assessments to using a 1-5 scale. As a result, the overall number of points shown in the gradebook was much lower than in previous years, and that difference was making him a little uneasy. I asked him to describe how he was using the scale.



He explained that each task had clearly defined success criteria, and students earned scores based on how well they met them. After he finished, he slightly shrugged and added, "But I just don't know if it's working." I asked, "Do you feel like the grades your students are earning reflect their learning?" He paused and said, "Yes." He continued with sharing that there were fewer A's than in previous years – and, interestingly, no F's at all. I asked again, "Do you think these grades are an accurate depiction of student learning?" With more confidence this time, he said, "Yes."



Our conversation continued as the group looked more closely at the grading practices they used. The list was long and varied, and how they were used was compared.

- Weighted averages
- Curved scores
- Dropping the lowest test
- Participation points
- How to handle missing or late work
- Make-up opportunities

It became clear that no two teachers at the table used the same approach to determine the grades students received in their courses. As I listened, I couldn't help but reflect on a powerful question that surfaced: Do we want to frame grades as a collection of points, or do we want grades to be a reflection of learning?

When students focus on earning points, their motivation is often centered on compliance, doing the minimum, or boosting their grade rather than truly understanding what is being taught. When we shift the focus to learning, something more meaningful can happen.

- Curiosity is sparked.
- Persistence increases.
- Students take ownership of their growth.
- Learning becomes the goal, not just the grade.

What if we could get our students to chase learning instead of chasing points? Chasing learning is far more powerful and lasting than chasing points. Learning goes beyond the classroom and school walls. After all, points disappear after a course ends, but what students learn and how they learn stay with them for life.



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