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# The Value of a Pointless Education

Jay C. Percell  
jpercel@ilstu.edu

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**Getting Students to Mastery**

## The Value of a Pointless Education

*Jay C. Percell*

**A grading system that eliminates points promotes intrinsic motivation and true content mastery among students.**

It was spring. The semester was waning, and summer's promise of freedom and excitement was tangible at our large suburban high school west of Phoenix, Arizona. However, the 11th grade students in my American literature class and I still had some work to do. I had just rolled out one of our few remaining assignments, and after I finished speaking, the class sat in silence until a bold student asked, "Mr. Percell, how many points is this worth?"

As I watched this student mentally calculating percentages, I knew what he was really asking: "Do I have to do this assignment at all? Will my grade be OK if I take a zero?" This was the moment when teaching changed for me and I became determined to redefine what education and learning meant—at least within my own classroom, if nowhere else.

I decided to restructure my classes to foster authentic mastery learning and increase my students' intrinsic motivation, as opposed to simply having them accumulate points to get a grade. This journey would lead me to experiment with grading and to ultimately develop what I call the No-Points Grading System.

### The Problem with Points

Reflecting on my seven years as a secondary teacher, I concluded that the point values ascribed to assignments hindered true, authentic learning among my students. I could see three ways that points created a problem in my classroom: (1) Points were means to an end, (2) Points were extrinsic rewards, and (3) Points ascribed a sometimes misleading value to assignments.

#### Points as a Means to an End

Many of my students' primary concern was not what they learned or what skills they gained but what final grade they would receive. When I polled students informally, a large majority indicated that they did not necessarily care whether they learned *anything* in a class, as long as they got an *A* (or a *B* or whatever letter grade they deemed satisfactory). Usually, their desires for these letter grades were extrinsically fueled by the desire for a high class rank or grade point average or for such incentives as cell phone privileges, car insurance payments, and even outright cash for grades from parents or grandparents. This mentality seemed to have what Edwards and Edwards (1999) referred to as a "crippling effect" on learning (p. 261).

#### Points as Extrinsic Rewards

How many times has a teacher lamented, "That assignment was worth 50 points! I can't believe this student didn't even turn it in"? Points themselves are not what students care about. Points only provide students with an imagined source of motivation, which many times proves ineffective (Brilleslyper et al., 2012; Pink, 2009). We cannot cultivate strong intrinsic motivation in students by offering them more points (Huhn, 2005). Instead, we must make the work they do in class challenging, achievable, and above all meaningful.

## Points Ascribe Value

As Weimer (2011) indicates, points detract from collective learning in our school cultures. Points imply value, yet the point values of assignments are often misleading. The amount of work required for an assignment or its importance may not correspond to its allotted points. When looking at their assignments, students may calculate the points they need and deem it unnecessary to do an assignment that appears hard, opting instead for an easier, but less essential task with a similar point value. As teachers, we must craft our assignments and score them in a way that makes their inherent meaning and immediate value readily apparent to students.

## Solution: The No-Points Grading System

In the summer following my student's question about points, I embarked on a complete course redesign that encompassed the course objectives, the unit assessments, the class activities, and the way they all were graded. I began with my regular 12th grade British literature course that fall, basing my redesign on two pillars: the Understanding by Design framework of Wiggins and McTighe (2005) and the tenets of mastery learning, originally conceived of by Benjamin Bloom (1968) and more recently expounded upon by several others (Guskey, 2007, 2010; Lalley & Gentile, 2009).

My first objective was to create a standard of measurement that did not involve a point value. I used the four-tiered rubric for our state's standardized written exam, the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS): Exceeds, Meets, Approaches, or Falls Far Below. In addition, the 6+1 Traits of Writing (Culham, 2003) provided a framework for me to assess my students' work qualitatively.

Following the AIMS rubric, I decided to only give scores of *E* (Exceeds); *M* (Meets); *A* (Approaches); or *B* (Far Below) for written work. (Ironically, *As* and *Bs* were the two lowest possible scores.) The passing line was between Meets and Approaches, which became an essential cut-off line to my grading system, as it clearly distinguished for students the caliber of work that was acceptable from that which was not.

## Earning an A the Point-less Way

To align my course to my new grading system, I broke down all course work into four categories: Performance Assessments, Written Assignments, Literary Terms, and Journals. Performance Assessments contained unit assessments, either district-mandated performance assessments, like a persuasive essay all sophomores are required to write, or assessments of departmentwide learning objectives, like a literary analysis essay, but it also could contain benchmarks for my own course-specific curriculum, such as exams or tests constructed as projects or performances. Written Assignments contained all course assignments—for instance, identifying and defining a tragic hero from a text, or writing a letter to the city council, or analyzing a poem. Literary Terms were extended definitions of course-specific vocabulary (simile, metaphor, hyperbole, and so on), and Journals were self-reflective, weekly or biweekly student entries on a given (or sometimes optional) topic.

For each category, students had to earn a specific number of Exceeds and Meets to achieve a certain tier: top, middle, or low (see fig. 1). Essentially, top-tier work meant that most of the time students exceeded the standards, but if not they still met them. Mid-tier work meant that most of the time students met the standards, and if not, they exceeded them. In the low tier, students met the standard most of the time.

### FIGURE 1. Categories and Tiers in the No-Points Grading System

#### Category 1: Performance Objectives (4 total)

- Top Tier: 3 Exceeds, 1 Meets
- Mid Tier: 1 Exceeds, 3 Meets
- Lower Tier: 3 Meets

#### Category 2: Written Assignments (10 total)

- Top Tier: 6 Exceeds, 2 Meets
- Mid Tier: 2 Exceeds, 6 Meets
- Lower Tier: 6 Meets

**Category 3: Literary Terms (12 total)**

- Top Tier: 7 Exceeds, 3 Meets
- Mid Tier: 3 Exceeds, 7 Meets
- Lower Tier: 7 Meets

**Category 4: Journals (27 total, completed in class)**

- Top/Mid Tier: 27 Complete
- Lower Tier: <27 Complete

To translate these four categories into traditional letter grades, students had to demonstrate a specified amount of mastery in the top and mid tiers.

- To earn a final letter grade of *A*, students needed top-tier work in three categories and mid-tier work in the fourth.
- To earn a *B*, students needed mid-tier work in three categories and top-tier work in the fourth.
- For a *C*, students needed mid-tier work in three categories. Students who were not meeting the standard (with mid-tier work or better) were in danger of failing. All students had to meet the standards in the Performance Assessment category to pass.

Assessing students in this fashion more closely resembled performance expectations in the real world (White, 2012), and it gave equal weight to different types of activities. Students who were poor test takers could earn a final grade of *A* on their report cards by demonstrating learning through written work, projects and presentations, or independent journaling.

Meeting the standards on all performance assessments was required, but students could essentially make their grade anything they wanted it to be by selecting which assignments to complete and redoing them up to three times until they were satisfied. Beyond students having control over their grades, their scores were also criterion-based; the scores individual students earned on specific assignments were not related to the scores of their peers.

**Mastery in Practice**

As Lalley and Gentile (2009) point out, in a true mastery-learning system, the mastery level should not correlate with the highest score a student can achieve but with the minimum passing level. In my system, students who wanted to achieve the highest marks had to go above and beyond the minimum standard and demonstrate higher-order thinking skills. Mastering essential skills was mandatory for all students, even if they needed multiple opportunities to do so (Gentile & Stevens-Haslinger, 1983; Lalley & Gentile, 2009).

Some educators worry that when students of differing abilities are given the same amount of time to complete the same objectives, students who finish early will end up wasting time (Mueller, 1976). Proponents of mastery learning admit that this could happen, but they suggest offering additional enrichment objectives for students who master course concepts and skills more quickly (Lalley & Gentile, 2009), thus giving them more opportunities to exceed standards. In my classroom, I never had much of a problem with wasted time when using the no-points system. My students were continually busy attempting to master a skill, meet a performance objective, or exceed standards on an assignment to increase their overall grade. This work was largely independent and self-directed.

My weekly routines usually began with teaching or reteaching content related to objectives students were still attempting to master, introducing new concepts, modeling, and providing time for both guided and collaborative practice. By the end of the week, all students had at least one assignment (usually more) to work on in class. During this time, I monitored and checked students' work or met with students one-on-one about their assignments to discuss why they received the scores they did and what they could do to improve. These conferences were solely student-driven. It was up to the student to schedule the conference and to direct and guide it.

**Challenges Along the Way**

The results that I saw in my four years using this system were compelling enough for me to promote it to my colleagues. But what did students and administrators think?

**Student Reactions**

Initially, there was a backlash among students against this grading system. They were not used to this style of grading, and it was an icy shock to their systems. It seemed to deviate from everything they had ever known about school. At first,

many students objected and refused to try, and their scores and quarter grades were low.

The students who seemed to struggle the most with the system were the highly skilled students who had received As their entire lives, usually without exerting much effort. These students, who had mastered the game of school (Fried, 2005), suddenly found themselves being asked to improve on their own performance, without comparison to the students around them.

Slowly but surely, as they worked through the process of corrections and revision that Guskey (2010) highlights, both the skilled and the striving students began to realize that they could succeed in this grading system—they just had to keep trying. As that realization settled in, student after student dug into assignments with renewed fervor. I saw students collaborate. I saw them revise. I saw them relearn. I saw them improve. I saw them excel to levels I had never seen before. Across the board, regardless of skill level, the quality of students' work rose exponentially.

It was worth the initial complaining and foot dragging when, in subsequent years, recent graduates would return to visit and say things like, "Mr. Percell, compared to your class, college is easy." (I don't necessarily agree with that, but it was a rewarding vindication.)

## Administrative Reactions

I had tremendous administrative support when I implemented this grading system. The value of this support cannot be understated; it was key to the success of this system. My administration at the time was interested in mastery learning, and they helped me recognize the strong ties between no-points grading and mastery learning.

Still, the transition was difficult for my administration, especially early in the semester, when students and parents were objecting and grades across the board were low. It is difficult for administrators to listen to a teacher tell them, "I know the scores look bad now, but in the end it will all work out. Trust me."

And yet, they did. That sort of relationship of trust and respect does not always come easy, but it can be cultivated through mutually sustained effort and open communication. My administration continued to support me in this grading system, and I am grateful for their patience and faith in me.

## Eliminating Points, Engendering Mastery

After that first semester, despite the challenges, I deemed the No-Points Grading System so successful that I implemented it in all my classes for the subsequent three years. With this system in place, my education practices aligned harmoniously with my education beliefs, making this the most rewarding time of my entire classroom career.

I had certainly come a long way from that spring day when my student asked me how many points our assignment was worth. Instead of having students ask whether they needed to know something for the test or when they will use something in real life, I found myself sitting at a desk at the front of the room, talking with a student about her most recent essay. I listened to her explain why she had included a certain phrase as she sought my counsel on how to make it even stronger. I allowed myself a moment to pause and casually assess the activity level of the rest of the class from my chair. There was a tangible buzz in the room; students were at their desks, dutifully engaged in their independently paced assignments. Satisfied, I reengaged with the conference at hand. When the bell rang and students began filing out, I overheard one student mumble to his friend, "I hate this class. All we ever do is learn."

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[Jay C. Percell](#) is an instructional assistant professor in the School of Teaching and Learning at Illinois State University in Normal, Illinois.

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