

Beyond Measure: "UnGrading" Your Classroom

Chris Gleason

Midwest Clinic

W187 10:00-11:00 AM, December 21, 2023

Session Description

Our traditional education grading system is outdated, fraught with bias, and reliant on extrinsic motivation. I believe we tend to focus on the assessments that measure what matters least in our schools. Overburdened, underfunded, hard-working teachers are struggling to meet the needs of increasingly complex classrooms while being mandated to teach to the test in hopes of achieving high standardized test scores. Assessment isn't seen as a tool for learning but rather the end in itself. Assessment can provide the necessary feedback for teachers to improve their practice and for students to gauge their growth.

When done correctly, assessment can define what is truly important in a classroom and communicate growth to caregivers, parents, and community members. You see, assessment is not evaluation but includes evaluation. Assessment answers questions. I have seen these principles ring true in my classroom:

- Self-assessment is powerful because it mandates reflection and analysis.
- Gathering information does not require a test, and reporting information does not require a grade.
- You can measure anything, but that does not mean it is important.
- A single letter or number does not convey the complexities that it is meant to summarize.

When done correctly assessment can provide the vital information needed to meet the needs of students. Our traditional use of assessment must shift from comparisons & labels to self-assessment & growth.

Ungrading is not as simple as just removing grades. The word "ungrading" suggests that we need to do intentional, critical work to dismantle traditional and standardized approaches to assessment. This session will examine the use, and purpose of assessment and grading. We will look at research and reflect on our methodologies thinking deeply about equity, effectiveness, and grading practices. We will imagine and construct new assessment methods that serve the most important people in the room - the students. Please join us for a session that will dismantle some historically bad practices regarding grading and replace them with equitable ideas that will transform not only the way you teach but also your relationships with your students. Students deserve better feedback, better questions, and more opportunities to demonstrate learning in a way that resonates with them. It is time to change the assessment paradigm, to go beyond measure and to ungrade our classrooms!

1. Let's Take A Quiz

- a. With someone near you, describe a time recently when you were graded or evaluated.
 - i. Did you know that you were being evaluated?
 - ii. Did you feel prepared?
 - iii. Did you understand what you were being evaluated on?
 - iv. Did you receive feedback about how you did?
 - v. Did you have a chance to offer your perspective or background information before or after the evaluation?
 - vi. What did you learn from the process?
 - vii. Did you receive a grade/number/label?
 - viii. How did the process make you feel once it was completed?

2. History Of Grading

a. Adolphe Quetelet

- i. Adolphe Quetelet first used the mathematical concept of averages to explain human traits.
- ii. Adolphe Quetelet was born in Belgium in 1796. At age 23 he received the first doctorate in mathematics ever awarded by the University of Ghent. Smart and hungry for recognition, he wanted to make a name for himself like one of his heroes, Sir Isaac Newton. Quetelet marveled at the way Newton uncovered hidden laws governing the operation of the universe, extracting orderly principles out of the chaos of matter and time. Quetelet felt that his best chance for a similar achievement was in astronomy, the leading scientific discipline of his time.
- iii. In 1830, just as he was wrapping up his tour of Europe, Quetelet received bad news: Belgium had plunged into revolution. The Brussels observatory was occupied by rebel troops.
- iv. Quetelet had no idea how long the revolution would last, or whether the new government would support the completion of the observatory—or if it would even allow him to continue as Belgium’s head astronomer. It would prove to be a turning point in his life—and in the way society conceived of individuals.
- v. Quetelet found himself longing for a stable government that passed sensible laws and policies that would prevent the sort of social chaos that had derailed his career plans—and that seemed to keep leading to upheaval all around Europe. There was just one glaring problem: Modern society seemed utterly unpredictable. Human behavior did not appear to follow any discernible rules, just like the universe had seemed so indecipherable before Isaac Newton.
- vi. At this time, using a system of averages proved useful for measuring astronomical characteristics, like charting a planet’s movements. A number of observers would take turns keeping track of the same celestial body and afterward, the average of their measurements would be used to get an accurate calculation.
- vii. Quetelet then applied this system to human beings. He measured thousands of people, both psychologically and physically, and averaged out the results in order to find what he considered the perfect “Average Man.”
- viii. By his logic, if everyone were optimally fed and lived under the same environmental conditions, they would be average. And this is what society should be striving for: the continual improvement of the average of the group.

b. Designed For No One

- i. So in 1926, when the Army designed its first airplane cockpit, they measured the physical dimensions of male pilots and calculated the average measurement of their height, weight, arm length and other dimensions.
- ii. The results determined the size and shape of the seat, the distance to the pedals and the stick, and even the shape of the flight helmets. This means that, in part, pilots were selected based on their ability to fit into the cockpit designed for the average 1920s man.
- iii. This worked more or less up until World War II, when the Army began recruiting hundreds of new pilots to expand its air forces (which became a separate branch of the military in 1947). But with the birth and expansion of the Air Force came a decline in performance and a rash of deaths. Even with no war, pilots continued to die during training, as they were unable to control their planes.
- iv. In 1950, the US Air Force measured 140 dimensions of over 4,000 different pilots and used the average of these measurements to design their first-ever standard airplane cockpit. Amazingly, not one pilot fit the dimensions of the cockpit. Research showed that

when they used just three dimensions – neck, thighs and wrists – only 3.5 percent of pilots fit these averages. So, by using 140 dimensions, they essentially ensured their cockpit would fit no one.

- v. Eventually, they created adjustable seats. As a result, they not only improved the effectiveness of the pilots they already had but expanded their talent pool.
- c. Francis Galton
- i. A mathematician by training, Galton viewed Quetelet as “The greatest authority on vital and social statistics”. Galton agreed with almost all of Quetelet’s ideas save one, the idea that the Average man represented Nature’s ideal. Galton believed that it was the imperative of humankind to attempt to improve on the average as much as possible, and he cited his cousin Charles Darwin’s research to support his claim, writing, “What nature does blindly, slowly, and ruthlessly, man may do providently, quickly, and kindly”.
 - ii. Thus, Galton rejected Quetelet’s conviction that individuals who deviated from the average represented “error”. At the same time, he agreed with Quetelet’s concept of types since he believed that the Eminent, the Imbecile, and the Mediocre each comprised a separate type of human being.
 - iii. In 1883, one year after Darwin’s death, Galton gave his research a name: eugenics. With the introduction of genetics, eugenics became associated with genetic determinism, the belief that human character is entirely or in the majority caused by genes, unaffected by education or living conditions.
 - iv. Eugenicists worldwide believed that they could perfect human beings and eliminate so-called social ills through genetics and heredity. They believed the use of methods such as involuntary sterilization, segregation and social exclusion would rid society of individuals deemed by them to be unfit. Galton once stated, “Intelligence is rarely found in the disabled, in the poor, in women, and in non-white humans”
- d. Brigham & Terman
- i. In the early 1900s the eugenics ideology was widely held by many of the top thinkers of the day who used their talents to create measurement tools and protocols like SAT and IQ tests that would prove Eugenics to be true. These test results were used to determine access to opportunities for others.
 - ii. Lewis Terman was eager to measure human minds in the early 1900s. With questions ranging from mathematical problems to vocabulary items, the Americanized test was supposed to capture "general intelligence," an innate mental capability that Terman felt was as measurable as height and weight. As a hardcore hereditarian, he believed that genetics alone dictated one's level of general intelligence. This vital constant, which he called an "original endowment," wasn't altered by education or home environment or hard work, he maintained. To denote it, he selected the term "intelligence quotient."
 - iii. Carl Brigham was an American eugenicist and professor of psychology at Princeton University's Department of Psychology and a pioneer in the field of psychometrics. He sat on the advisory council of the American Eugenics Society and his early writings heavily influenced the eugenics movement and anti-immigration legislation in the United States. In 1926 he created the SAT for The College Board.
- e. Frederick Winslow Taylor
- i. Frederick Winslow Taylor, an economist, is considered the father of scientific management. Taylor's development of scientific management principles revolutionized how work was organized and optimized, emphasizing efficiency, standardization, and the systematic measurement of tasks. His ideas significantly increased productivity, reduced waste, and helped streamline production processes, making him a key figure in the emergence of modern management practices. Although his rigid principles often

prioritized the pursuit of maximum efficiency at the expense of workers' well-being and job satisfaction. His focus on breaking down tasks into simplified, repetitive motions was seen as dehumanizing, leading to monotonous and alienating work environments. The mechanistic approach he advocated often ignored the qualitative aspects of work and the complex human elements involved in the production process. Furthermore, Taylor's methods contributed to a top-down, authoritarian management style that eroded workers' autonomy and creativity.

f. Edward Thorndike

- i. OK...one more. Enter Edward Thorndike [CLICK]. August 31, 1874 – August 9, 1949) was an American psychologist who spent nearly his entire career at Teachers College, Columbia University. Thorndike believed that schools should sort young people according to their ability so they could efficiently be appointed to their proper station in life, whether manager or worker, eminent leader or disposable outcast - and so that education resources could be allocated accordingly. Thorndike's guiding axiom was "Quality is more important than equality".

g. Taylorism Today

- i. We have used these Tayloristic principles based on the average to make correlations that don't exist, to stereotype learners, and to not consider the unique potential and capacity that is within us all.
- ii. Consider the "jagged profile" of our learners.
 1. How do we consider the individual attributes of each child?
 2. How do we intentionally actively seek out information in order to best meet their needs?
 3. How do we foster those things they do well while supporting those they do not?
 4. What are we looking at when we "assess" or grade our students?
 5. What things are we not looking at or even considering?
 6. Personalizing education is necessary. Yet, while these attributes are important, they do not fully encapsulate all that is learned in an instrumental music classroom.
- iii. Imagine Marvin the Martian came to our planet and destroyed everything except your assessment data. What would it say about what you value? What would it say about the way you look at students?

3. 10 Reasons To End Grading

- a. Diminish students' interest in whatever they're learning.
- b. Create a preference for the easiest possible task.
- c. Reduce the quality of students' thinking
- d. Makes you less efficient and prevents "flow"
- e. Crushes creativity
- f. Crowds out good behavior & encourages unethical behavior
- g. Fosters short-term thinking
- h. Incapable of representing the complexities that it is meant to summarize
- i. It creates competition and comparisons
- j. Continues and potentially grows bias "baked into" the system.

4. Institutional Bias

- a. When the procedures and practices of institutions operate in ways that result in certain groups being advantaged or favored and others being disadvantaged or devalued.
 - i. Grades reward those who have resources, time, support, prior knowledge.

- ii. Grades often do not recognize and support students with fewer support systems, and who have experienced more systemic barriers to academic success as well as more negative experiences with schools and other institutions of power.
- 5. The problem with grading for learning and other “improvements”
 - a. It is not enough to replace letter or numbers with labels
 - b. It is not enough to use rubrics
 - c. It is not enough to tell students in advance what’s expected of them.
 - d. It is not enough to disseminate grades more efficiently
 - e. It is not enough to add narrative reports to grades
 - f. It is not enough to use “standards-based” grading
 - g. It is not enough to get rid of zeros
 - h. It is not enough to remove student behaviors (participation, attendance, effort)
 - i. It is not enough to accept late work
 - j. It is not enough to put up posters about “growth mindset”
- 6. “UnGrading” Your Classroom- The Seven Paradigm Shifts
 - a. “UnGrading” Your Classroom Paradigm Shift 1: “Grading Is Not Necessary For Learning But Feedback Is”
 - b. “UnGrading” Your Classroom Paradigm Shift 2 - Assessment vs Evaluation
 - i. Assess - gather information
 - ii. Evaluate - examine & analyze information
 - iii. Act - do something with it. This does not require that it be labeled, compared, or ranked. In fact, it may not even need to be “reported” (paradigm shift).
 - c. “UnGrading” Your Classroom Paradigm Shift 3 - Starting With Why: Creating Purpose
 - i. To make instructional decisions.
 - ii. To provide an opportunity for students to develop critical thinking skills and musical independence.
 - iii. To provide meaningful feedback to the student
 - iv. To show the effectiveness of instruction and curriculum.
 - v. To collect evidence for stakeholders
 - vi. To answer questions
 - d. “UnGrading” Your Classroom Paradigm Shift 4 - Who does the assessing?
 - i. Teacher
 - ii. Student Self-Assessment
 - iii. Peers
 - 1. What is the “best” ratio of these? Why?
 - e. “UnGrading” Your Classroom Paradigm Shift 5: It Begins With Quality Teaching & Curriculum
 - i. “One can have the best assessment imaginable, but unless the accompanying curriculum is of quality, the assessment has no use.” - Howard Gardner
 - 1. Music Selection
 - a. Interrogate our curriculum/literature choices
 - 2. Analysis
 - a. Uncover deep meaning and rich concepts to teach
 - 3. Outcomes or Aim - a long-term focus that is rich, multi-layered, significant, and is naturally derived from a specific piece of music and what students need.
 - a. Used as our summative assessment.
 - b. Three types of outcomes
 - i. Skill
 - ii. Knowledge
 - iii. Affect

4. Strategies - represent the “teacher’s playground”. This is “how” we get to the destination.
 - a. Used as our formative assessments.
 - b. Modalities
 - c. Learner-Centered
 - d. Scaffolding
- f. “UnGrading” Your Classroom Paradigm Shift 6 - When To Assess?
 - i. You can’t stop assessing.
 1. Summative (linked to your outcomes)
 2. Formative (every strategy IS an assessment)
 3. Diagnostic (the assessment most often neglected)
- g. “UnGrading” Your Classroom Paradigm Shift 7 - How To Assess?
 - i. Pay attention
 - ii. Ask questions
 - iii. Ask more questions AND better ones!
 - iv. Allow students agency to demonstrate understanding in different ways that authentically highlight their assets.
 - v. Provide Autonomy, Mastery and Purpose
- h. Tools For Capturing Learning and Growth
 - i. Google Forms
 - ii. AutoCrat Add-on
 - iii. Letters & Templates
 - iv. It’s Alive
7. Why Change Is Hard
 - a. Fear
 - b. Mental Models
8. Vision For The Future
 - a. Portrait of a Graduate
 - b. Competency-Based Transcripts - check out [Mastery Transcript Consortium](#)
 - c. Schools Free From Labels

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Chris Gleason

Arts and Creativity Consultant

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

608.264.9554 (office)

608.512.7962 (cell)

facebook.com/gleasoncmp (facebook)

www.chrispgleason.com (website)

gleasoncmp@gmail.com (personal email)

christopher.gleason@dpi.wi.gov (work email)

[Beyond ArtLess Podcast](#)



Chris Gleason is the Art and Creativity Consultant for the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. He recently concluded twenty-five years as an instrumental music educator in East Troy, LaCrosse, and most recently Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. He is the 2017 Wisconsin Teacher of the Year, 2017 and 2022 semi-finalist for the GRAMMY Music Educator Award and the first Wisconsin teacher to be named a finalist for National Teacher of the Year in 50 years. He was recently selected as one of five educators for the prestigious 2022 Horace Mann Award for Teaching Excellence by the NEA Foundation as well as a Top 50 Finalist for the 2021 Global Teacher Prize sponsored by the Varkey Foundation and UNESCO. Mr. Gleason was selected from 8,000 nominations from 121 countries around the world. He was recently honored with the Wisconsin Badger's Outstanding Educators Award and the Alumni Distinguished Achievement Awards from his alma maters, UW-Eau Claire (1997 BME) and UW-LaCrosse (Masters 2002).

In 1992 Mr. Gleason was selected as the Wisconsin Governor's Scholar to Interlochen Arts Camp in Interlochen, Michigan. Mr. Gleason has performed professionally at Disneyland, Valleyfair, and the Mall of America. He has been guest conductor of numerous camps and festivals including the Music For All National Band Camp, Tarleton Invitational Band Festival (Texas), National Band Association –Wisconsin Chapter Junior High All-State Band, Tri-State Honors Band, UW-Madison Summer Music Clinic, UW-Milwaukee Honors Band, UW-Whitewater Band Camp and numerous regional honor bands across Wisconsin, California, Georgia, Illinois, Minnesota and Mississippi. Mr. Gleason's bands have performed at the Milwaukee Art Museum, Wisconsin State Capitol Rotunda, the "New Wisconsin Promise Conference", and the 2006 and 2009 Wisconsin State Music Conferences.

In 2009 Mr. Gleason created the [ComMission Possible Project](#), which has commissioned 14 new works for bands by renowned composers such as Viet Cuong, Kelijah Dunton, John Mackey, Alex Shapiro, Erika Svanoë, Andrew Boysen Jr, and Michael Markowski. The project continues to expand, inviting schools nationwide to participate in the unique, interactive commission process. In 2024 he will commission composers - Brian Balmages (band), Alysia Lee (choir), and Jessica Meyer (orchestra), in 2025 JaRod Hall (band), Jodie Blackshaw (band), Jennifer Jolley (band), and in 2026, Carol Brittin Chambers (band) and JoAnne Harris (band). His work at the state level has led to the creation of the [Wisconsin Creativity Summit](#) and [Wisconsin Arts Celebration Project](#) linking poets, composers, and arts educators in the creation of a unified work.

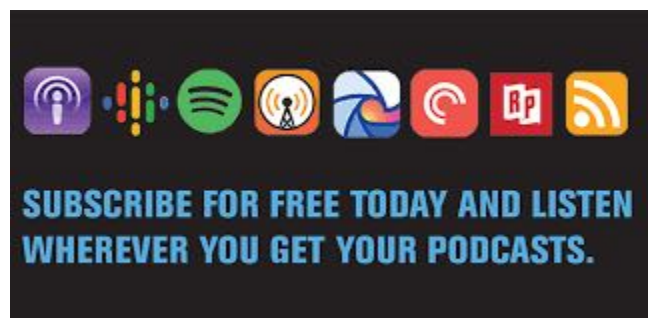
He is the chair-elect of the Wisconsin Comprehensive Musicianship through Performance (CMP) Committee, the past chair of the Wisconsin State Middle Level Honors Band and the Wisconsin State Middle Level Honors Project. He has taught workshops at VanderCook College of Music, the Los Angeles Unified School District in

California, The NAFME National In-Service Conference, numerous school districts in the Midwest, and Hong Kong. He has presented clinics at the Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic as well as the Minnesota, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin State Music Conventions.

In 2020, he was selected for the Music for All's Advocacy in Action Award as well as the 2019 "50 Directors Who Make A Difference" School Band and Orchestra Magazine Award. He has also been recognized with the UW-La Crosse Distinguished Alumni Award (2017), Melvin F. Pontious Sparks in Music Education Award (2016), Michael G. George Distinguished Service Award (2016) and the Vi Miller Award for Excellence (2013) by Dane Arts and has been featured in the March 2015 Instrumentalist Magazine, and books: [*Think Like Socrates: Using Questions to Invite Wonder and Empathy Into the Classroom*](#) (Shanna Peeples, 2018) and [*Rehearsing the Middle School Band*](#) (Stephen Meyer, 2018). He was a 2018 National LifeChanger of the Year Award nominee. Mr. Gleason is the founder and organizer of the [*Beyond The Notes Music Festival Inc.*](#) in Wisconsin Dells which has to date inspired more than 44,000 young musicians and 85 future music educators.

In 2017, Mr. Gleason also held a position as Engagement Specialist for the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction delivering presentations at universities, school districts and conferences across Wisconsin. Mr. Gleason also assisted TED-Ed with the development and launch of an online course that teaches educators how to identify, record and share their ideas in the form of short, TED-style talks. Mr. Gleason recently presented his own talk at 2019 TEDxOshkosh entitled, "[*Lighting a Fire in Kids*](#)". He has worked with Teach Plus in a national effort to support Title II funding as well as preventing gun violence in U.S. schools. Mr. Gleason was selected as a 2018-19 NEA Foundation Global Learning Fellow and recently traveled to South Africa. He currently serves as a mentor on the NEA Foundation Global Learning Fellowship Team and as an Advisor for the NEA Foundation.. Mr. Gleason is a representative for the Sun Prairie Education Association and a member of the American School Band Directors Association (ASBDA), National Band Association (NBA), Wisconsin Music Educators Association (WMEA), National Association for Music Education (NAfME), National Educators Association (NEA), Wisconsin Educators Association Council (WEAC), Wisconsin Teachers of the Year Network (WTOYN), Wisconsin Bandmasters Association (WBA) and the [*National Network of State Teachers of the Year*](#) (NNSTOY) He is a Conn-Selmer and VanderCook Clinician.

PS - Chris also is the producer and co-host (along with Phil Ostrander & Peter Haberman) of a pretty bad podcast called Beyond ArtLess. If you are looking to waste 45 or so minutes, check it out.



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