A Simple Mastery-Based Grading System Part 1 Lennie Symes {An excerpt from my upcoming book *Own My Learning*}

> **Instead of focusing on feeding grades and scores, learner daily work should be about feeding learners and teachers useful feedback on next steps for learning. That's what this simple mastery-grading system targets.**

There are instructional practices in traditional grading, and even standards-based grading, that need to retire. A move to mastery-based grading doesn't always eliminate persistent traditional practices in schools. While many transitioned to standards-based grading models, arguably a big improvement over traditional grading, these implementations repeatedly carried over many of the undesirable practices of traditional grading. These tweaks prevent the realization of truly personalized/customized learning. As one of my educator friends, Melissa, eloquently stated in a video we made a few years back about grading:

> *"I don't think grading works the way we've traditionally used it. It didn't make sense to me when I was a student. It certainly doesn't make sense to me as a teacher. I am giving a percentage over four different areas in language arts that have 40 standards. But I'm giving one grade? I mean, that math doesn't work to me." (TIE, 2018)*

There are two big barriers to making significant change in grading practices: 1) breaking entrenched systems, or as the book _Inevitable refers to them, weight-bearing walls that cannot be torn down without significant work (Schwahn & McGarvey, 2012), and 2) difficulty in envisioning a better system.

My focus here is on the latter: what could a mastery-based system look like as opposed to traditional grading or standards-based grading? Can you create a mastery-based system without graduated grades or number scales (ABCD or 4321)? The mastery-based system at its simplest can be binary: Mastery Achieved or Not Yet. This can be applied to a course or content area over a term, like a semester or year. Within a semester, trimester, or year, educators have content broken into units or learning targets (LTs), typically five to twelve LTs. For each LT, there are the same two possible states: Mastery Achieved or Not Yet.

At both these levels, "Mastery Achieved" speaks for itself. The "Not Yet" means work is in progress, so you need a system of communicating the level of progress by each learner.

Course/Content Area
Mastered

Course/Content Area
Progress

Learning Target
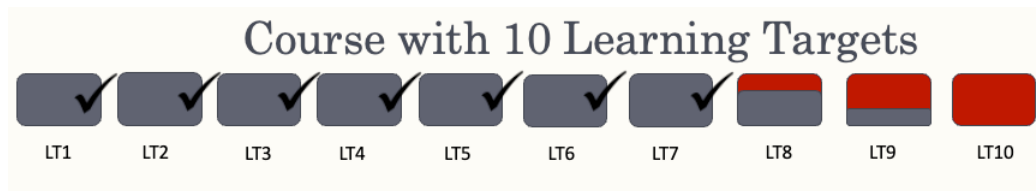# Mastered

Learning Target
Progress

Traditional grading systems have for years treated the needs of all four levels the same, typically averaging work from: 1) the practice daily work level, 2) the LT competence (e.g. tests), 3) continuing to average across multiple LTs for a single grade pretending to describe the progress during a semester/year, 4) and eventually merged to the final grade. Even though the feedback needs differ vastly from one level to the next, we shoehorn one incompetent grading system to work for all the levels using some form of averaging across all four levels. Mastery-based grading systems should differentiate feedback at each level of progress reporting.

Course/Content Area Level

If a learner is in the Not Yet stage of a course or content area, how can we signify their progress? In its simplest form it can be based on their mastery of the learning targets. For example, if this course or content area has 10 learning targets, we can

communicate progress by how many learning targets have been mastered so far:

Course with 10 Learning Targets
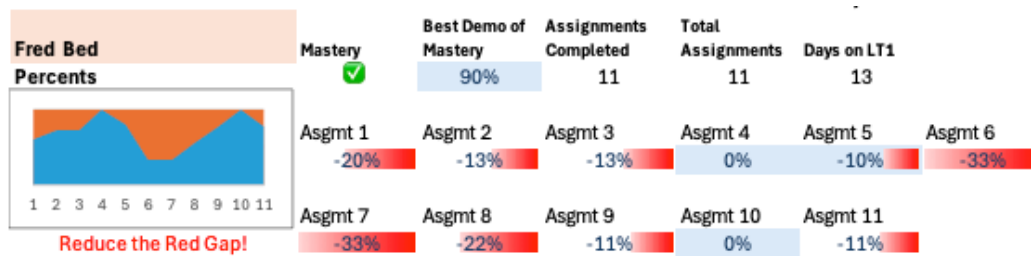LT1 LT2 LT3 LT4 LT5 LT6 LT7 LT8 LT9 LT10

In this example, the learner has mastered seven of the ten targets—in other words, they have mastered 70% of the LTs, which means they have 3 left to demonstrate mastery. The beauty of this system is that it communicates so much more information as to how the learner is progressing. For example, if you are a parent, a case-worker, a judge, another teacher, an administrator, a relative— in a traditional setting you might get a C- representing the learner's progress. In contrast, this mastery-based report communicates what has been achieved and where the gaps are. Even without knowing the learning targets, progress is much more informative– and if you include the LTs, then there is even more depth. If you are an adult responsible for a learner's progress, which report gives you a better picture on a learner's progress–a letter grade or mastery of LTs?

Learning Target Level

The important point with daily work and examining learner progress is that FEEDBACK is the key. This was one of the big lessons for Hattie's Visible Learning body of research. This is the big lesson with nearly all of Dylan Wiliam's work and Susan Brookhart's work. Instead of focusing on feeding grades and scores, learner daily work should be about feeding learners and teachers useful feedback on next steps for learning. That's what this simple mastery-grading system targets.

At the learning target level we can still use the same binary outcome: Mastery Achieved or Not Yet. To evaluate progress we examine the daily work. It is not averaged into a grade, rather it is displayed in a form that tells the learner and the teacher if they are ready for demonstrating mastery (e.g. taking the test). While you can use 3-point, 4-point, 5-point systems, the simpler form for daily work or practice is to show distance from perfect mastery. Here is a sample of what that can look like for a learner working on the learning target Percents:

Fred Bed Percents	Mastery ✅	Best Demo of Mastery 90%	Assignments Completed 11	Total Assignments 11	Days on LT1 13

Asgmt 1	Asgmt 2	Asgmt 3	Asgmt 4	Asgmt 5	Asgmt 6
-20%	-13%	-13%	0%	-10%	-33%

Asgmt 7	Asgmt 8	Asgmt 9	Asgmt 10	Asgmt 11
-33%	-22%	-11%	0%	-11%

Reduce the Red Gap!

Note with this learning target there are 11 assignments. This report displays each assignment with a red bar that shows how far the learner is from perfect mastery. What you hope to see is that each assignment the bar gets shorter as the learner progresses. Once learners can repeatedly show a level of competence with the daily work, they then can move to the demonstration of mastery (e.g. tests, projects, papers).

In this simple form, each learning target is gauged by a mastery cutoff level established by the teacher. In this example I set it at 90%. This same cutoff can also provide feedback to learners on the daily work. Notice where the assignments have a higher percentage than the mastery cutoff, the cell is in blue. At a glance you can see if the learners are getting close to being ready for the demonstration of mastery (if there are not many blue assignments, consider reteaching or more practice). Another beauty of this system, if the learner doesn't achieve the cutoff with their demonstration of mastery, the system simply reports "Not Yet"–no demotivating grades that communicate incompetence like traditional grading. In this example, the green checkmark signifies they passed the demonstration of mastery.

In a simple mastery-based grading system:

- Individual daily work assignments are expressed in percentages of distance from perfect mastery. This feedback informs teachers and learners on what is needed to be ready to reach competence without the complication of grades or number scales. Daily work doesn't apply toward "a grade". Instead, it provides learners and teachers feedback on what to do next.
- Learners attempt the mastery demonstration only after daily work shows sufficient competence. The learners are ready to demonstrate mastery, they need to exceed the cutoff percentage that represents mastery previously set by the teacher.

- The number of learning targets mastered (or not mastered) expresses progress in a course or content area, which is much more informative than letter grades, number scales, or percentages. Mastery progress provides the "big picture" feedback to learners/teachers and shows learning gaps in clear format.
- When a student masters all learning targets, they have mastered (or completed) the course/content area.

Each level serves its purpose in expressing the progress of a learner—with no averaging and no graduated grade/score. There are two levels of progress reporting and two levels of mastery reporting. Note the two progress reporting stages provide feedback to learners where deficiencies lie and where focus for learning needs to be applied.

This model described above is not definitive—there are many ways to implement a mastery-based grading system. Primary features of this model are 1) instructional feedback drives the learning (as opposed to working for the grade) and 2) simplicity eliminates the complications of letter grades, number scales, statistical calculations. The model is also flexible for customized/personalized classrooms, where progress monitoring of mastery and gaps can flex easily with learners working on different learning targets at different times.

To help explain how a simple mastery-based system can work, I created a spreadsheet (https://lcsym.es/gradesheet) as a proof-of-concept for educators. You can input the learning targets, learner names, and scores to quickly produce reports for learners and parents (see examples above). It is not intended as a replacement for a student information system, rather a trial tool to experience the power of mastery-based reporting, without averaging or graduated grades/scales (ABCD or 4321).

Why bother switching to the simple mastery-based grading system?

- Daily work displays what the ongoing learning needs are for each learner. Daily work determines readiness to test or demonstrate mastery with no averaging or graduated grades/scores.
- Progress within a course or content area is determined by the number of learning targets mastered (e.g. 7/10). This system provides a clearer picture of where a learner is the process and what gaps need to be addressed.

- When all learning targets are mastered, the learner has completed the course or content area.

The other powerful aspect of this simple mastery-based grading system is that it is an easy transition from traditional or standards-based grading. There are no complicated algorithms, no new language to communicate to learners or parents.

Resources:

Schwahn, C. J., & McGarvey, B. (2012). Inevitable: Mass customized learning: Learning in the age of empowerment. Chuck Schwahn & Bea McGarvey.

Technology & Innovation in Education. (2018). Grades & Class Ranks. CustomizedU: Grades & Class Ranks. https://youtu.be/ezPb1G2XUY0?t=61