



## HOW DO YOU GAUGE ACHIEVEMENT?

BY PHIL AND DEB RAMSEY

**H**ow are your kids doing at school? If you are like most parents, this question makes you think about grades. We generally judge achievement at school based on grades, so much so that you may have heard comments like “Alex is a B student.”

Assessing students to establish their level of competence is important for both the development of learners and the management of quality within school systems. But what are the likely effects of these performance-based judgements? And, given the growing need for people to make learning a life-long practice, how do these judgements contribute to that goal?

### Holistic Achievement

Although grades are important, they are merely one part of a larger picture that, if overemphasized, can distort the learning process. In “The Inner Game of Work: Building Capability in the Workplace” (V8N6), Tim Gallwey describes how, in order to reach high levels of achievement, we must pay attention to three interdependent results of work or, in this case, study: performance, learning, and experience. Grades are a measure of performance; they indicate the extent to which your work meets the demands of an assessor. As such, a grade gives an indication of your current capacity. Learning, on the other hand, is the process of growing your capacity. And experience represents the level of personal fulfillment we derive from the process.

When we think of achievement in terms of performance alone, we tend to take actions that maximize grades at the expense of learning and experience. Students may be able to perform—achieve a passing grade—without learning. They simply use the capacity they already have or find some way to bypass the need to learn, such as rote memorization. Or they may work beyond

their capacity, putting in long, stressful hours that undermine their experience of school. Think of undesirable behaviors, such as students representing other people’s work as their own, taking part only in those activities they know they can do well, and experiencing burnout; or educators “teaching to the test.” In each of these cases, the people involved treat performance as the sole measure of achievement, sacrificing learning and experience as a consequence.

What can you do to help your children—and yourself, if you are undertaking some form of study—to take a broader view of academic achievement? Just prior to your child receiving a graded piece of work, have her draw three lines on a piece of paper, each with 0 at one end and 100 at the other. Label them “Learning,” “Experience,” and “Performance.” These lines will act as scales to record what the student has achieved.

Explain that the teacher’s grade measures only one thing: how well the work met the teacher’s demands. It doesn’t indicate how much the child learned or what her experience was like. The teacher can’t grade learning or experience because only the child knows those things—they are important parts of work that people need to assess for themselves.

Talk with the child about how she could determine a score for “Learning.” You could say, “How much have you changed as a result of doing this work? Do you feel that you’ve made a bit of a step forward in how well you understand the concept? That you’ve made a giant leap?” Focus on whether the work involved learning some facts she’ll soon forget, or whether it has changed the way she views the world. Discuss how this project compares to work she’s done in the past. Then ask the child to put a mark on the “Learning” scale that represents how much she has learned.

This score could go up when the teacher gives back the work; she could learn more from the teacher’s comments. However, the score will not go down.

Next, talk about what the experience of doing the work was like. You could say, “Think of three different words that describe how you felt while doing the task.” A child may want to talk about the experience for a while. Mention that an experience doesn’t have to be fun to be valuable. Then have her mark a score on the “Experience” scale that represents how valuable the experience was.

If the child hesitates to suggest a score in these areas, say, “These scores are about how *you* feel you did. Because this is the first time you have done this task, you haven’t got anything to compare it to. The more you do it, though, the better you will get at giving yourself scores that say what you want them to say.”

### Sustainable Learning

The process we have described is not designed to minimize the importance of standards in education. We believe that students need to learn how to establish what teachers require and set performance-based goals for themselves. Performance, however, is not the only element necessary for life-long learning, even though it features uppermost in the minds of many involved in education. As a teacher, parent, or student, you can find ways to view achievement more holistically. By doing so, you’ll nurture the invaluable process of sustainable, life-long learning. ■

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