Grading according to standards, competencies, or concepts is nothing new. With the current grading system gaining more scrutiny, parts of the basic framework of how we grade students are being questioned. Stephens (2010) and Marzano and Heflebower (2011) reinforced the notion that homework, behavior, attendance, notebooks, and group work should not be factored into a student's grade. Standards-based grading allows students to be graded solely on mastery of course content, which can lead to student motivation and a meaningful learning relationship. As family and consumer sciences educators, we need to demonstrate to students the standards under which they will be evaluated in the professional and postsecondary world.

Grading according to standards, competencies, or concepts is nothing new. Hirst discussed its promise when reviewing the role of the “new” competencies put in place for vocational education. With the current grading system gaining more scrutiny, parts of the basic framework of how we grade students are being questioned. Scriffiny (2008) noted that homework grades do not accurately express student understanding. Stephens (2010) and Marzano and Heflebower (2011) reinforced the notion that homework, behavior, attendance, notebooks, and group work should not be factored into a student’s grade. All three agree that instead, students should be graded solely on mastery of course content. This pedagogy is challenging to some when they think about changing our current system of grading. Our attitudes toward grading are often set by the way we were graded as students, personal beliefs, district policies, or by undergraduate degree programs (Stephens, 2010). Although our grading system may be ingrained in us through past experiences, many educators have combined parts of grading against standards into their current pedagogy and may not realize it. Before we make major changes to our grade book, what small changes can be made to have an impact on student learning? How many educators are following these ideas and don’t even realize it?

As family and consumer sciences (FCS) educators, we have been trained to use our content standards as guidelines in designing our curriculum. According to the National Association of State Administrators of Family and Consumer Sciences (NASAFACS), “Content standards relate to what individuals need to know and be able to do, or what is expected of the learner” (2012, p. 1). Using competencies as a guide, teachers can identify student learning targets throughout a unit. These content standards allow instructors to develop a “clear and concise set of standards with precise levels of mastery” (Scriffiny, 2008, p. 74). When a clear set of standards is identified, teachers can develop formal and informal assessments to gauge student learning along with creating intervention strategies to help struggling students. Once classroom teachers are able to identify the learning
targets, students can then pursue these targets that guide their learning (Dueck, 2011). Dueck also noted four different types of targets that can be used by students and teachers to guide learning: Knowledge targets (what students need to know); Reasoning targets (what should students be able to do with this information); Skill targets (how can students demonstrate mastery); and Product targets (what can I make to show my learning). Many of us already plan a unit with the end goal in sight along with planning assessment and activities to express mastery of standards. However, students may not be aware of the end goal of a particular unit or semester. Instead of sharing the activity or assignment students are going to complete during class, we could tell students the learning target to be mastered through this assignment (Adams, 2012). Because standards are used to guide curriculum, why not assess just on mastery of standards?

Because standards are used to guide curriculum, why not assess just on mastery of standards?

Hirst (1973) explained this standards-based grading approach this way:

Its greatest promise seems to be its ability to place the student in a meaningful relationship with the domain of knowledge so that his progress can be measured based entirely on his individual efforts. What is more human than letting the learner know, in advance, what he [sic] is expected to know, under what conditions he will be expected to know, under what conditions he will be expected to demonstrate his knowledge, and the level or degree of acceptable performance he is to achieve (p. 50-51).

When students are assessed against competencies, they can see their progress over each concept as the unit, semester, or year progresses.

When students are assessed against competencies, they can see their progress over each concept as the unit, semester, or year progresses. Students are motivated and encouraged to see their progression especially when they can see exactly what concepts they have grasped (Marzano & Heflebower, 2011). Along with grading students over mastery of standards, some other
changes can come into play to benefit student motivation and learning. Consider designing assessments and other activities by concept. Dueck (2011) explained that assessments could be designed so that each concept is chunked together. Once the assessment is graded, students can see the breakdown of each concept instead of receiving an ambiguous 60% on a test and not knowing their learning per the standards. When instructors are clear regarding which standards are mastered and which need more work, they can adjust instruction to help students. This can be helpful to students on both ends of the spectrum. Gifted students are challenged and struggling students can retest through formative assessment (Scriffiny, 2008).

NASAFACS (n.d.) stated: “Today’s students are the future leaders and members of tomorrow’s families, workplaces and communities” (p. 1). Although FCS educators are charged with preparing tomorrow’s future leaders, we need to demonstrate to students the standards under which they will be evaluated in the professional and postsecondary world. Parents have noted that standards-based grading is similar to workplace evaluations (Scriffiny, 2008). Postsecondary students in the doctoral degree program are given their competencies at the beginning of each course and then asked to write a reflection linking activities back to each competency. The goal is for students to be able to expand their understanding of their professional competencies by applying them in the classroom and in the workplace (Turner, Altiere, Clark, Maffeo, & Valdez, 2005).

FCS educators can prepare students for life outside of high school by making a few simple changes to our curriculum and grading system. It’s time we challenge ourselves, our departments, our school districts, and our state departments of education to better prepare our students using standards-based grading. This not only will increase their learning, but also will better prepare them for the rest of their lives while providing accountability and visibility for our FCS programs.

We prepare leaders . . . now it’s time for us to show leadership to our Career Technical Education (CTE) and core academic colleagues by embracing standards-based grading.

REFERENCES


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