

# Introduction

*Life is a series of natural and spontaneous changes. Don't resist them—that only creates sorrow. Let reality be reality. Let things flow naturally forward in whatever way they like.*

—Lao Tzu, Chinese philosopher

**I**f teachers were surveyed about who has had the biggest impact on education, it's unlikely that James Pillans would land near the top of the list. He might not make it at all. Despite Pillans' relative anonymity, he dramatically changed teaching and learning. In 1801, Pillans invented the blackboard and colored chalk, education tools that have endured for more than 200 years. Sure, many teachers have gravitated away from chalk and slate to Interactive whiteboards and tablet computers, but Pillans' centuries-old invention remains a staple in classrooms worldwide. What made Pillans' idea so revolutionary is that it provided a simple solution to an imposing problem. "Teachers had no way to present a lesson or a problem to the class as a whole; instead they had to go to each individual student and write a problem or assignment on each one's slate" (Concordia Online Education, 2012). Enter Pillans, who taught geography at the Old High School in Edinburgh, and his blackboard, which gave students a new visual world of learning.

Photo by John Vachon.



**Pillans' blackboard revolutionized instruction.**

If James Pillans could impact education for hundreds of years with a blackboard and chalk, isn't it possible that another absurdly simple idea can revolutionize education for the next two hundred years? Modern education needs a modest solution to an even more grievous problem—measuring learning with numbers, percentages, and letters. Like those 200-year-old slates, traditional grades have been the norm for so long that they aren't often questioned, yet they continue to leave cavernous potholes on the road to achievement and independent learning. Ask students what they've learned or tell them to assess themselves and most respond with blank stares. When students can't assess their own learning and understanding of what they have or have not mastered, this is a titanic problem that must be fixed. The good news is this important issue can be rectified with James-Pillans-type simplicity. Assessment 3.0 is today's

blackboard, and it can modernize teaching and learning without inventions or manufacturing costs.

I know this because I've experienced this revolution in my own classroom, and I've witnessed many teachers across America and in other countries make the transition away from grades. It took years for me to comprehend the deleterious effects of grades. When I began my career as a classroom teacher more than 20 years ago, I was convinced that teaching was about lecture, worksheets, homework, tests, and grades. Evaluation was reduced to simple math. Students scored points on various activities; I added the numbers, calculated a percentage, and placed a letter grade on a report card. These were my methods for a very long time, and a host of students struggled to excel because of them.

Reflecting on this horrible injustice, it struck me that I was not alone. In fact, most teachers back then and, unfortunately, many today continue to teach in this old-fashioned way. Even renowned education researcher and author Carol Ann Tomlinson needed time to recognize her own faulty approach. "My metamorphosis in coming to understand what effective use of assessment looked like and ultimately appreciating its great potential to enhance teaching and learning was glacially slow" (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013, p. x). After more than a decade of inundating students with homework and worksheets and returning their work with only numbers and letters scrawled at the top, I converted my classroom into what I call a Results Only Learning Environment—a vibrant, joyous, somewhat chaotic place, filled with enthusiastic learners. The tantalizing part of this exciting classroom is the complete elimination of any kind of measurement of learning. Numbers, percentages, and letters disappeared from students' activities, projects, and even tests. The results-only classroom contains lively conversations about learning and descriptive narrative feedback, and students are given the chance to revisit prior learning and make changes to their work in order to demonstrate mastery. Some people believe a classroom without grades to be impossible, but the research and my experience prove otherwise.

## THE ARGUMENT

The primary purpose of this book is to convince educators and parents around the world that eliminating traditional grades is not only possible but is, in fact, necessary if we are to evolve beyond the archaic measurements that stifle learning. Throughout the book, I will argue for not just more formative assessment but for assessment that is based on a routine formula that both teacher and student use daily to critique learning. This formula is called SE2R. The abbreviation stands for Summarize, Explain, Redirect, Resubmit. Although it may look like something intended for a math or science class, SE2R is designed to appraise learning in any subject and at any grade level. The influence of SE2R is remarkable, considering its simplicity. This formula is the foundation of Assessment 3.0, a system that may seem improbable but contains a truth that teachers, administrators, and parents can no longer ignore: Measuring learning is education's principal problem—one that stunts the growth of our students even more than a lack of technology, oversized classrooms, and standardized testing. SE2R generates an ongoing conversation about learning, leading to mastery of concepts and skills in a way that traditional grades cannot.

The transition to teaching without grades is no small task, as it requires rejecting an established model that has dominated education virtually since its inception. To support this appeal for major education reform, I will argue throughout this book that number and letter grades are not only wholly subjective, they are immaterial when it comes to understanding what students have and have not accomplished in an academic setting. The goal is to convince you that attempting to measure achievement is a fruitless endeavor that reveals nothing about learning and, far more disconcerting, disdains the opinion of the student. In order to ascertain any substantive understanding of what students accomplish in an academic setting, a two-way dialogue is necessary; you will see what this dialogue looks like and how it impacts learning and motivation in various places throughout the book.

Along the way, I'll share my history with both traditional and progressive education, but more important, I will share the astonishing stories of teachers, principals, parents, and students who have experienced a no-grades classroom and SE2R feedback and are unwilling to return to an environment where learning is built on the blind subjectivity of grades. The results they have realized demonstrate that education without grades is not only necessary but also realistic. What about admission to college, you may wonder. How can students be evaluated without a GPA? College deans and professors will share alternative ways for evaluating students for admission, and I'll explain the *community college effect*, a theory, built on some interesting research and a hypothesis, suggesting that the achievements of junior college students offer strong support for eliminating traditional grades. This book isn't only about research and anecdotes. There are strategies for providing meaningful narrative feedback, for using technology for assessment, for creating significant conversations about achievement and, perhaps most important, for teaching students to be self-evaluative, independent learners.

### BREAKING BARRIERS

Assessment 3.0 has its barriers, four of which will be addressed throughout this book. First, administrators are bound by policy and aren't comfortable with sweeping change. Therefore, understanding how to integrate a feedback model, while appeasing school leaders, who likely will not embrace radical reform, is critical. Second, until traditional report cards are abolished (I believe that one day they will be), final grades should be a conversation between teacher and student. If a mark is required for a report card, let's ask our students what they believe that grade should be, based on a detailed assessment by both student and teacher of all that was or was not accomplished during a grading period. Third, parents are accustomed to grades. Some of education's most important stakeholders, parents can push back pretty hard when they don't see numbers or letters on their children's work. Because parents only understand grades,

moving away from what I call assessment 2.0 can be a bigger mountain to climb for parents than it is for teachers. Fourth, and most daunting, is the barrier of time and tradition. Resistance to major reform is easy, when people rely on the “that’s-the-way-we’ve-always-done-it” refrain.

## WHAT ABOUT ACCOUNTABILITY?

We live in an era of standardization, accountability, and high stakes testing. I’ve encountered teachers in the field who read my first education book, *Role Reversal* (Barnes, 2013), which introduces SE2R and the elimination of grades. Many of them love the philosophy behind narrative feedback but suggest that it’s impossible to fully implement, due to the accountability measures and standardized testing that dominate today’s schools. “Even if I believe that grades are punitive, how do I get around them?” is a typical question. The short answer is not always well received because it offers no plan. “You just do it because our greatest responsibility is to kids,” I’ve often said. “Measuring learning with numbers and letters is inherently wrong, and it has to stop.” I’ve realized over the past few years that a different, more profound, response to this concern is necessary. The deeper dive and, hopefully, silver bullet answer to embracing Assessment 3.0 is contained in this book.

Many teachers have already thrown out their grade books. They are using SE2R, which is discussed in full detail in Chapter 3. Others have nudged grades closer to the wastebasket, choosing strategies like standards-based grading that mimic SE2R in one way or another. Assessment 3.0 is, I believe, the boldest example of education reform that we’ve ever seen, and the one that will forever change teaching and learning. So, before dismissing the idea as outlandish or as something an administrator won’t allow, consider the case studies, models, strategies, and tips in this book. In the end, you may completely alter how you assess learning, or you might simply fine-tune what you currently do. Either way, you will be part of a transformation that will impact students now and forever.