

# ***The Personalization of Education***

*-a discussion about differentiation, personalization and eportfolioing.*

**The “I need some feedback on what I need to focus more and less on” edition please send thoughts/ideations to [ilandy@mac.com](mailto:ilandy@mac.com)**

**Ian Landy**

## Preface

*Portfolios should tell a story. That is something report cards can't. Getting to story telling (and the mindset that a picture can tell a thousand words) isn't always easy, but it is worth it on the road to personalized learning journeys.*

*And as a believer of a guided gradual release of responsibility along with Design Thinking - I hope we can personalize what these learning journeys look like. They don't have to look the same ... though they may start out looking similar.*

**Empathize** (can we understand why communicating student learning is more important than reporting student scores based on tasks and tests? How this feels for the learner, the teacher, the family...)

**Define** (what does personalized learning and archiving learning through eportfolios mean... what does it look like?)

**Ideate** (does personalized learning have to look the same for all learners? does archiving student examples have to look the same from year to year? do learners need to all have the same samples archived as each other? will students be motivated without grades?)

**Prototype** (knowing that we will make mistakes along the way...how do we try out things like: descriptive feedback? eportfolios? personalizing learning based on needs rather than age....?)

**Test** (not with multiple choice questions, but testing what works for the learners as well as the teacher to create a personalized journey...transition away from Xs and %s with descriptive feedback)

*And then make use of formative descriptive feedback loops along the journey to see what needs to be edited, altered, added, deleted in order to make it work for the individual.*

### **Why This Book?**

I hope that this book gives a variety of entry points for people who are interested in shifting their practice and communicating student learning in an ongoing manner making use of eportfolios. I also know that this practice has helped me better differentiate and personalize the learning process and make the "day in the classroom" become a better fit for the unique needs of each learner. I hope that this book gives people a way to visualize how to start their own shift in practice and make effective use of eportfolioing student learning.

There are some mindshifts that are needed though:

- not everyone needs to do the same amount/type of work
- we collect information on student learning based on learning outcome rather than task
- learning can be communicated in an ongoing manner better than a couple of times a year
- when students are better connected to their learning and the assessment process, they are better engaged in their learning journey

Likewise I am trying to fill the discussion with experiences that I went through on my own evolution to making use of eportfolios and further personalizing the learning journey. To help, I have tried to sort some of the key shifts in practice into four "Entry Points" -

Entry Point One: where I more or less "started out" - a little bit traditional...

Entry Point Two: where I made my first "stretch" and changed what I was doing to better meet the needs and match

Entry Point Three: where I made some of my best changes to practice that helped focus the teaching and assessment even more so on the learner in a more personalized manner

Entry Point Four: where I am pushing myself now - and where I think education should be moving to....maybe...!

Discussion One - Faster Horse (expanded) page 7

Discussion Two - In Utero (history) this isn't anything new page 10

Discussion Three - The devolution of the checkmark & percentage page 16

entry point one - numbers and letters and confusion

entry point two - shifting away and using standards (and 1-4)

entry point three - Descriptive feedback

entry point four - I may be wrong, but what if I am right?

Discussion Four: Descriptive Feedback Specific (examples) page 22

entry point one: good work

entry point two: performance standard/rubric linked to artifact

entry point three: two stars and a wish

entry point four: just keep talking/videoing/noting

Discussion Five - Teacher Work (start with LOs at the top of your grade book) page 29

gradebook: entry point one - tasks vs outcomes

entry point two - outcomes vs big questions

entry point three - communicating about Big Questions/Curricular Organizers

entry point four - where we are going, we don't need grade books

Discussion Six - Descriptive Feedback Loops page 35

The importance of ongoing descriptive feedback loops

entry point one: traditionalist

entry point two: first steps

entry point three: engaging learning

entry point four: might be too much - I might be wrong

Discussion Seven: Why/What Type of portfolio? page 42

entry point one: everything (yep - I spelled it that way)

entry point two: curating success (competencies vs highlights)

entry point three: highlights and add-ins (progression vs growth)

entry point four: reflective and ongoing

Discussion Eight: Learner Profiles ( a Rosetta Stone of sorts) page 54  
and what should be communicated via eportfolios

Discussion Nine: Personalized? Individualized? page 64

- How Design Thinking and GeniusHour made learning a 24/7 event - and why we no longer need to compare students to each other, but to standards...

Discussion Ten: What ifs.... page 68

## Discussion 1: I Don't Want A Faster Horse

It was at the ending of a school year that had led me to BCPVPA/UBCs ShortCourse and at the same time, to read a variety of books, tweets and thinkings. Through these readings, I first acknowledged that I had finally "moved past" my previous looks for a 'better report card'. Henry Ford is noted for saying, "if I asked people what they wanted, they'd ask for a faster horse." Steve Jobs is noted for saying "people don't know what they want until you show it to them." I knew that my work on improving report cards would never be enough - something different (and differentiated) was needed.

The summer came to a close with me sharing out my schools' experience shifting to eportfolios at an edcamp at a Principal/Vice Principal summer session. There I got to reflect that after a decade-and-a-half of "tweaking" report cards to make them better, I have come to the realization (rationalization?) that report cards are good at doing what they do: report student achievement. I (and others) tried to force the 100+ year old report card to do something it wasn't designed to do: communicate learning.

But....What about the pride that students take in getting letter grades? I know too well how too often letter grades are too heavily influenced by behaviour and task completion and sought for an extrinsic reward, often money for letter grades on report cards. Neither of which really measure or show how much learning has been done.

But...how will students get into university? Already I know that alumni (such as myself) of UBC have been contacted to help with a methodology used by other universities such as MIT & Harvard: looking at the entire body of learning of candidates to help determine if they are a good fit for university learning.

But...%s? Which are often based on imprecise measurements including homework (raise your hand if you ever copied or were copied off of) and unit/chapter tests (how many are norm referenced, analyzed, etc?) not to forget how attendance and 'lates' play a role (but shouldn't) let alone behavioural influences.

When questioned by a colleague about 'liking to see how their child "measures up" to others in the class' I was able to share out my belief that a "B" or 77% does not (can not) communicate specific strengths & areas for growth for the learner. Also, we try not to 'compare students to each other' but rather focus on showing student samples compared to provincial learning standards exemplars which communicate specifically on what 'typical' grade learners should be doing.

The closest I ever got to "repurposing" report cards was my final year as a full-time classroom teacher (just accepted my first VP assignment) where I used a report card template our school was proud of, but I put photos of student work instead of subject feedback in the comment boxes. My principal (a positive disruptor in his own right) said "we" (district) weren't quite ready yet. Six years later, the eportfolios my school community are using do so much more than just 'show students work'; they reach the goal of "communicating student learning".

But....accountability? I feel our 'feet are closer to the fire' because samples of student work has to be archived and shared. It's not about 'bonus marks' or 'doing more work for extra credit' it is about the learning that has been done. It also enables better communication: as one parent said after seeing her son play guitar, 'he plays so much better at home' and the



challenge was issued: record him at home and we will add that to the archive to show what he is able to do.

But...more work? I won't say it's less work than report cards, but it is spread out throughout the week (throughout each day) instead of an artificially created "due date for learning" and options (such as the app our school community is using: freshgrade) enable easy archiving with a variety of feedback methodologies, including/especially descriptive feedback.

A better report card? I know there are still teams working on them, but I have learned to accept report cards as devices that worked well for what they were designed for, but schooling and learning today is so very different from then. It is easy to get caught up in the 'game of school' but strategies such as "descriptive feedback instead of marks/letters/checkmarks/etc" and "communication tools" such as eportfolios enable the focus to be on learning (not scoring). But I also know that I didn't know that I wanted eportfolios (liked real portfolios but didn't love them) until I saw them in use by teachers, parents and students. I finally knew what it was that I wanted! It wasn't a faster horse/better report card despite my searching for one.

## Discussion Two: in utero - this is not something new

The quest for "a better report card" started before I was even born. I joke that I am tainted because my dad didn't read storybooks to my mom's belly or to me at bedtime, but instead read the articles that he was exploring during his Masters. Articles about why grades don't work in the way people want them to (as a motivator) and how report cards never ever tell the whole story of a learner's journey.

I suspect this because when I found my fathers journal a few years ago, it was full of articles with such glorious titles:

"The Farce Called 'Grading'" - by A.E. Lean that points out that 'doubtless the most tyrannical and indefensible [practice] is our insistence on attempting to evaluate students' performance through a system of grades or 'marks'" - taking an "exact subject where things are either right or wrong" and having expert teachers mark an identical copy of work and get scores ranging from the 90s down to the ... 40s.... and the shift to letter grades has not solved the problem; just reduced the number of categories. To say nothing about the mythos of speaking about "giving a grade" - do we give the desk a height? the typewriter a weight? Does spring break "deserve" a temperature of 72F?

***"We have had this asinine practice of grading in schools for so long that we unconsciously assume it to be necessary to the learning process, but this is a manifestly false assumption"*** Next to this underlined statement my dad's notes: "Report card purpose?"

That being said, the final section had two parts: a side note \* As William Clark Trow observes, "Marks. . . deserve to be abolished. Anyone who has not lived his life in the ivory tower, however, knows that trying to abolish them would be like trying to abolish money." Fortunately....even cash is

being changed! The other part was a problem "illustrative of the pathology endemic to the practice of grading" where a small midwestern town in which the editor of the local newspaper regularly printed on the front pages of weekly paper the complete names and marks of all the children in the town's schools each times report cards were issued.

"Report Cards and Parents" by Mary C. Austin opened by stating, "School report cards can be, and too often are, ambiguous and untrustworthy to a degree wholly unsuspected by parents" The earliest report cards were "developed as the school's major means of informing the pupil and his [sic] parents of the learner's progress." She points out that they were concise documents which used numbers or letters to rate the child's achievements in different subject areas. The learner was overlooked except as their behaviour and personality were reflected in the ambiguous category of "deportment". Again, highlighted by my father's pen, "in the hands of well-meaning parents, reports could become lethal weapons to be used for bribery, cajolery, and to promote competition among children. Unfortunately, too, parents often withdrew love and reassurance from children whose grades were low. Cheating and cramming were inevitable byproducts of these situations." Even back in 1965, Mary knew, "Undoubtably, the most effective type of report to parents is the informal one given each day by the youngsters themselves. A common question in many households is 'What did you do in school today?' Too frequently the reply is 'Nothing'. But this need not be the case if teachers will take time to discuss and evaluate each days activities with their pupils. *My bias is how eportfolio's can provide a view into the daily experience of learners (though I will argue that we need to be mindful of how often things are posted into efolios...*

"Can We Stop the Merry-Go-Round of Grades?", by Bea Bates ponders "Are grades really necessary: to motivate learning; to cull underachievers from classes in high school for which they are not academically qualified;

to prepare students for the competitive world in which they will live; for admission to a university or college?" After all, if grades are the goal of the student, they will act (or react) to reach that goal - doing what the teacher wants....or fail.

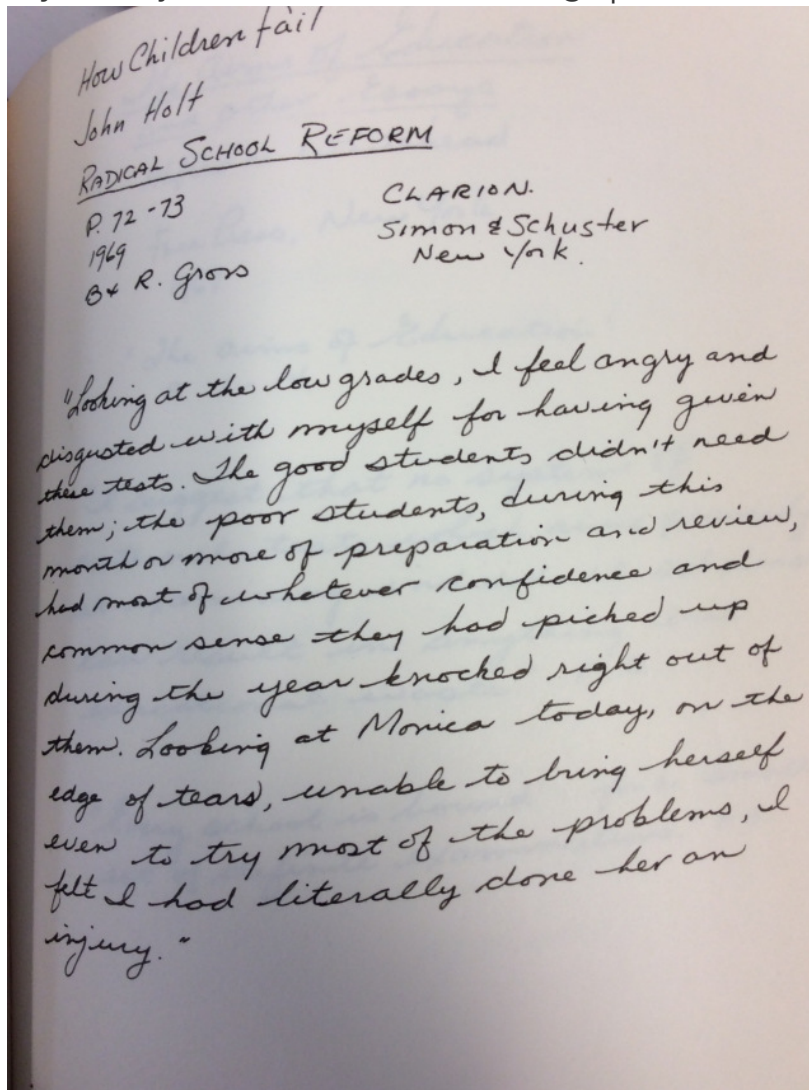
"Report cards...Who needs them?" by Judith Eddinger made a neat summation of her findings when students were "accustomed to working in a relaxed atmosphere, learning for the sake of learning, looking up answers in reliable sources - not memorizing, not preparing for tests, not cramming, not worrying, not tense, not working for that almighty grade. They wanted the right answer not to get a good mark on a test, but to make sure they had learned something." And this made her own "no report card" experience worthwhile...

Yet while the quest for a better report card has been long sought after, there have been many barriers: finding a common framework such as letter grades seems to make sense, but there are so many different understandings of what grades - and even percentages - depending on who you ask. And even more confusing is trying to determine what those percentages even mean - 50% an acceptable pass? If not, why not make it 60...or 70.... or does it depend on the subject areas - does it matter if your surgeon got 75% on their final test....what if it was multiple choice....what if it was a cutting practical...how would a patient even know? Which 75% of what they "need to know" do they know? Too often the percentages used by people who defend them by saying they are quite precise, don't often have a remedy to deal with the "missing knowledge" to get to 100% because too often the focus is on the tasks that were completed over the knowledge that was learned.

Concerns about grade reliability are nothing new. Recently I have referenced "C+ is the new F" in grade inflations – where anything less than a B requires an intervention.....by some.

There are also valid questions if tasks = learning. And which learning outcomes should the grades represent?

My dad's journal had an interesting quote:



Looking at the low grades, I feel angry and disgusted with myself for having given these tests. The good students need need them; the poor students, during this month or more of preparation and review, had most of whatever confidence and common sense they had picked up during the year knocked right out of them. Looking at Monica today, on the edge of tears, unable to bring herself even to try most of the problems, I felt I had literally done her an injury.

This led me to find the actual book online: [http://iwcenglish1.typepad.com/Documents/Holt\\_How\\_Children\\_Fail.pdf](http://iwcenglish1.typepad.com/Documents/Holt_How_Children_Fail.pdf)

Almost half a century later ..... It's "report card" time....and as an educator I struggle with my own kid's documents. Celebrating the successes that are different for each: my general anxiety son now has enough "stuff complete" that he can have numbers that represent his .....learning? My oldest girl wondering if the report will show the 115% she (theoretically since how can achievement be more than 100%) has in a class? And my youngest who still wonders 'what her teacher will give her'?

As I scanned the book I found it interesting that towards the end the author suggests a model of personalized learning similar to genius hour and passion projects – but not "one curriculum for all" ...sounding more and more along the lines of the value of... personalized learning.

While at the same time, being aware of concerns as shared on twitter by Ted Fujimoto that "No teacher can "personalize" instruction if they don't have a deep enough relationship with a student to know what is really going on with them personally and academically to trigger their curiosity and light their intrinsic motivation fire to excellence." Personalizing learning definitely needs relationships as well as mindsets that support ideations like genius hour and project based learning...and tools like eportfolios.

This is not to say that I have only been influenced by educators from a century ago - some of the current books and writers that also influence me include:

**Ken O'Connor** whose books: *A Repair Kit for Grading: 15 Fixes for Broken Grades* and *How To Grade For Learning* have influenced and encouraged my practice for over a decade.

**Myron Dueck** whose *Grading Smarter Not Harder* came along at a great time as I was pushing more into the use of eportfolios

**Caren Cameron** and **Kathleen Gregory** who inspired me when they first came to visit the district I was working in as I first stopped using check marks, Xs and did what their book encourages: Rethinking Letter Grades

And the district I am currently with is using the works of:

**Anne Davies, Sandra Herbst, Beth Parrott Reynolds** and **Brenda Augusta** in our own evolution to using eportfolios:

*Knowing What Counts - Collecting Evidence and Portfolios: Engaging Students in Pedagogical Documentation & Leading the Way to Assessment For Learning: A Practical Guide*

And so much is owed to "the black box" article that really hits home the importance of Assessment FOR Learning: **Paul Black** and **Dylan Wiliam**  
*Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards Through Classroom Assessment*

What is AFL

1. Clear learning intentions. Verbal is minimal, written on board (a few friends and I used a dart board image) as a reminder.
2. Provide examples of a range of work (great that we have BC Performance Standards that include a range of exemplars for many subjects (not project based exemplars but...))
3. Questions. Good deep questions – both to AND FROM learners. (This has led me towards elements and strategies like Geniushour and Self Organized Learning Environments)
4. Timely descriptive feedback (this is what led me towards what we now see as eportfolios)
5. Peer and self feedback (I found great value using document cameras and later iPads to show & share authentic student work to provide immediate feedback for areas for improvement and things to celebrate)
6. Practice and reflection. (Practice needs to be meaningful – more than just a compliance activity – and taking time to reflect on what has been done has inspired my ongoing "days-of-learning blog")