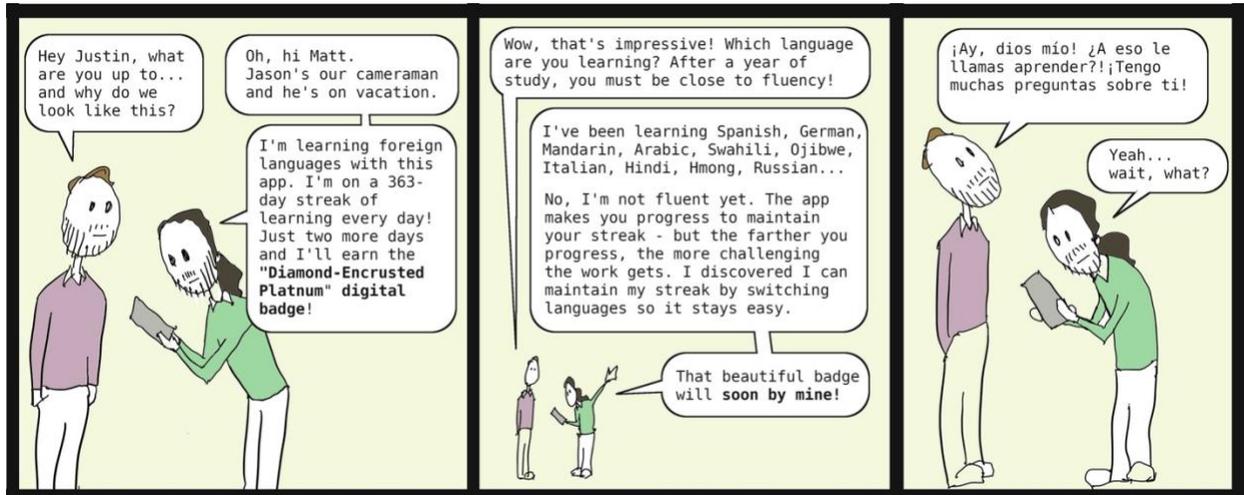


## Tech Snacks: Shifting focus from grades to feedback



### A Sad Story

Does the following scenario resonate?

You create a great assessment. Let's say it's a project of some kind. The learning is active. Students have autonomy/co-authorship of what they do and how they learn in the project. The learning and assessment is authentic—maybe it even uses an “open pedagogy” approach in which students get to contribute to real world issues. The project's instructions are accompanied by a clear assessment rubric. In short, it's a gem of a learning experience.

That is, it's a gem in the ideal world. In the real world, you're beset with student questions:

- “What do you want us to do here? What are you looking for?”
- “Does this count?”

Students approach your carefully designed rubric less like learners and more like litigators, searching for the minimum required to satisfy the criteria. You invest time answering questions, writing detailed feedback... and when you return their work, they flip straight to the score. The feedback goes unread.

## A Little Research

In her landmark 1988 study, educational psychologist Ruth Butler compared three feedback conditions: comments-only, grades-only, and comments + grades. Students who received comments alongside grades ignored the comments and focused solely on their scores. More surprisingly, the comments-only group showed greater interest and better performance on subsequent tasks than either of the other two groups.

And it's not just Butler's research. Decades of subsequent findings point in the same direction:

- When grades or scores are used to motivate performance, students tend to focus on the grade at the expense of learning and genuine skill mastery.
- Grades can motivate short-term compliance, but they often reduce students' intrinsic interest in the subject over time.
- When a grade is the goal, students tend to take the shortest, safest path to reach it — avoiding the productive challenge and even the productive failure that real learning requires.
- There is even research suggesting that students perform worse on complex tasks requiring analytical and divergent thinking when a reward is offered contingent on their performance.

## Topics and Strategies for Discussion

If our feedback is being ignored because the grade is consuming all of the student's attention, what might we do about it? The following strategies range from small structural adjustments to more fundamental shifts in how assessment works. None require institutional buy-in to try on a small scale.

### **Feedback-Rich Learning Activities**

Some learning activities naturally create space for feedback and self-reflection. Self-assessments, project-based learning with peer and instructor feedback, and ePortfolios all shift student attention toward what they are learning and how, rather than what they scored. ePortfolios are also a recognized High Impact Practice.

## **Turn Small Graded Assignments into Formative Assessments**

Consider converting low-stakes graded assignments into formative assessments: feedback is given, but no grade is recorded. When students know a grade isn't coming, they are more likely to actually read — and act on — what you wrote.

## **Reduce the Granularity of Scores**

The 100-point scale implies a precision that grading cannot actually deliver. Research on grading reliability suggests instructors cannot consistently distinguish between, say, an 83 and an 87. Consider whether a 4-point scale (Exemplary / Proficient / Developing / Beginning) or even a simple Pass/Not Yet might communicate more usefully — and redirect student attention from hunting points to understanding feedback.

## **Competency-Based Learning and Authentic Assessment**

Technical and professional programs may have a natural advantage here. When the standard is “can you safely wire this circuit?” or “can you perform this clinical skill correctly?” a grade of 73 communicates less than a simple Not Yet — try again. Competency-based approaches pair clear mastery standards with authentic assessments and allow reassessment, making feedback the engine of progress rather than a postmortem.

## **Ungrading**

“Ungrading” is the strategy of removing grades and scores as much as possible, relying instead on agreed-upon learning goals and ongoing feedback. When institutional grades are required, faculty and each student use dialogue to determine together what the student's grade should reflect. It is one end of a spectrum, not the only option — but understanding its logic helps clarify what any feedback-forward approach is trying to accomplish.

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