

Grading vs. Assessment of Learning Outcomes: What's the difference?

There is often confusion over the difference between grades and learning assessment, with some believing that they are totally unrelated and others thinking they are one and the same. The truth is, it depends. Grades are often based on more than learning outcomes. Instructors' grading criteria often include behaviors or activities that are not measures of learning outcomes, such as attendance, participation, improvement, or effort. Although these may be correlated with learning outcomes, and can be valued aspects of the course, typically they are not measures of learning outcomes themselves.¹

However, assessment of learning can and should rely on or relate to grades, and so far as they do, grades can be a major source of data for assessment. To use grades as the basis for learning outcomes, grades would first have to be decomposed into the components that are indicators of learning outcomes and those that are indicators of other behaviors. Second, grades would have to be based on clearly articulated criteria that are consistently applied. Third, separate grades or subscores would have to be computed for the major components of knowledge and skills so that evidence of students' specific areas of strength and weakness could be identified. For example, although 30% of a class may receive a grade of B, the group may all have shown a very high level of competence on one skill set but only moderate achievement in another. This kind of strength and weakness assessment provides feedback that is useful to students because it can guide and focus their practice, to the instructor, because it can reveal topics and skills that require further instructional attention, and to the department, because it can guide potential changes in curriculum to appropriately address strength and weakness.

This kind of analysis is not the same as producing sub scores for different course activities, such as a score for homework, one for exams, and another for projects. These are different methods of assessment, and each of these assess multiple skills and abilities and may overlap with each other in terms of what knowledge and skills they assess. To accurately assess learning outcomes, each type of assessment (i.e., exam, project, homework, writing assignment, etc), would need to be analyzed in terms of the different skills it addresses and scores across the various types of assessment activity would have to be compiled and assigned for each of the skills.

For example:

Items 4, 5 and 9 on an exam and homework 2 might all deal with the ability to identify the appropriate strategy to apply in a given problem context. The combined score from those items would comprise the "Identify solution strategy" score.

Many instructors already have this information to some degree but discard it when computing overall grades. If the scores for problems on exams or homework are individually scored already. To then turn these scores into a measure of student learning one would only have to classifying the problem according to the skill (or learning objective) it addresses, and then compute separate totals for each different category.

	Identify solution strategy (Exam 1) 15pt	Identify solution strategy (HW2) 20pt	Implement solution strategy (Exam 2) 10 pt	Implement solution strategy (HW 3) 10 pt	Total Identify strategy 35 pt	Total Implement strategy 20 pt	Total Score/ Grade 55pts
Student A	14	18	10	8	32	18	50=B

