Measuring What Matters: Learner-Centered Assessment

March 2022
“As adults in the building, we need to pave the way for students to demonstrate their learning in a way that makes the most sense for them and trust that when we give these opportunities, students will meet (and likely far exceed) our expectations.”

— Jeremy Walden, MVHS Principal,
Student-Centered Evidence,
at Mission Vista High School
“I feel like we shouldn’t let grades define us, and we should have the process of learning be more important than getting the grade… When I was younger, like freshman year, I just didn’t understand. I was like, “Oh, why can’t I get this grade?” And now I understand that it’s not about getting the grade. It’s about what is leading up to getting to what you’re satisfied about and what’s improving your learning”

— Megan Luck, Grade 12 Student, MVHS

The work to reimagine assessment practices at Mission Vista High School (MVHS) is grounded in Vista Unified School District’s (VUSD) commitment to personal learning and promoting equity. As MVHS principal Jeremy Walden points out, in order for learners to truly self-direct their learning paths, they must be empowered not only to co-construct learning toward a standard or skill but also have multiple ways and opportunities to demonstrate that learning. To Jeremy, this is one of the core beliefs underlying the school’s six-year journey toward personal learning.

At the same time, educators throughout VUSD are interrogating traditional assessment and grading practices through an equity lens. For example, according to district leaders, VUSD’s ongoing work to build and implement new performance frameworks is informed by a shared understanding that, historically, the ways performance data and other statistics were used can create or perpetuate false assumptions or stereotypes of people. Using data in this way, they argue, keeps opportunity and equity gaps firmly in place.

One of the hallmarks of VUSD’s approach to learning transformation is discovering and sharing a compelling “why” for change. This slide, inspired by the work of Ron Berger, articulates some of the reasons why the district is adopting new and more equitable performance measures and processes as part of its personal learning journey.

### Grounding Our Work: The WHY

#### Traditional Approach
- Use assessments to label and sort students
- Define students in terms of deficits rather than potential
- Remedial instruction focused on filling gaps in math and reading

#### What We Need Now
- Use assessments to guide
- Build on students’ strengths and resilience
- Honor students with meaningful and challenging work
- Cultivate a wide range of talents

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According to Jeremy, conversations about the implications of learner-centered mindsets on assessment practices began in earnest in 2017, soon after MVHS joined a cohort of innovators as part of a district-wide Personal Learning (PL) Challenge to implement personal learning. Prompted in part by recommendations from the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) accreditation process, MVHS educators set out to develop common assessments and rubrics.

However, as Jeremy recounts, what emerged from this prescribed work was informed by MVHS’s deepening commitment to personal learning: the products “were not the typical multiple choice type of assessment. Many of them were projects or writing pieces where teachers would collaborate around common rubrics.” The prevailing mindset, he says, was, “If we’re going to do this, let’s make sure that those assessments are authentic—that is, performance-based or have some relevance. If we can tie into students’ strengths, interests, and values, even better. It really was a shift toward what we were going to ask our students to do to demonstrate their learning.”

Performance-based assessment requires learners to apply knowledge and higher-order thinking skills to create a product or complete a complex, open-ended process. As a magnet school with a dual focus on Arts & Communication as well as Science & Technology, MVHS educators and learners already had a solid foundation in performance. As Jeremy explains, “So many departments and programs that we have at Mission Vista rely on students to perform in order to demonstrate their learning. Obviously the visual performing arts—it doesn’t get much more performance-based than that. Dance recitals and music, drama performances. It’s there, but now it’s trickling into the core [subjects] as well.”
According to Jeremy, passion projects and performances are now common across the grades and core subject areas at MVHS. However, the senior capstone course, My Vision Personalized (MVP), exemplifies what the school means by authentic, performance-based assessment that is aligned to students’ unique strengths, interests, and values. “They submit a proposal for a project they design themselves,” he explains. “It’s intended to incorporate the skills and the mastery they’ve gained in a subject area or combination of subject areas over their four years at Mission Vista.” At present, Jeremy notes, MVP is offered as an elective, but it is open to all students in the spring term of their senior year, and its enrollment has steadily increased since it was piloted with eleven students four years ago.

MVP is “taught” by a teacher, but in a non-traditional role. As Jeremy describes, the teacher acts as a facilitator of learning, “checking in with the students, helping them set deadlines, and acting as a coach—or really the chief cheerleader.” Because learners dive deeply into a subject of their own choosing, MVP teachers are not expected to serve as resident experts on every project topic. Instead, they support each learner to partner with mentors, such as a teacher in that subject or an outside expert.

“The students are self-directed—they’re designing the work, accomplishing the work, adjusting the work on the fly. And at the end of it, they are showcasing the work they’ve done to the larger school community.” And, Jeremy adds, “More than anything, they are reflecting on what it is they learned.”

Josh Jones, the first teacher of the MVP course and now the assistant principal at MVHS, echoes this emphasis on reflection, which was part of the course design from the very beginning. “The showcase at the end was meant to be a display of artifacts of the work—not just the finished product, but what they did along the way, including...”
what they threw out. The showcase gives them the opportunity to strut their stuff, reflecting on what was good and why."

In addition, says Josh, the capstone project is intended to serve as both a culmination of a student’s individual learning pathway and a bridge to the world outside of school. "It’s real-world because it relates to things that students want to do after high school—a researcher doing a research project, a writer writing a novel—going deep in a field of work they want to pursue."

The degree of self-direction, he points out, also mirrors real-world conditions: "They are responsible for creating their own deadlines, communication with me and with their mentor, setting goals and following through—like an independent contractor, but applied to a self-assigned project."

To illustrate how a capstone project can align to career goals, Robert Chodola, the current MVP teacher, describes one student’s idea for a music composition project aligned to his goal of becoming a music producer: "He already has plans for where he wants to go to school. He has a program he uses to compose music. He is already composing and transcribing music because it’s his passion. So that’s what his project is about. And obviously the capstone can act as a very early portfolio of work he can carry with him into his college education and beyond."

It is not surprising, given MVHS’s focus on the arts, communication, science, and technology, that many students choose to leverage their strengths and interests in these areas when they design their capstone projects. For example, Robert and Josh can point to a wide range of science and technology projects, including researching zebrafish as a source for medicine, designing a Disney ride based on Marvel heroes, writing about therapeutic horsemanship as a support for people with disabilities, and analyzing opioid addiction trends during the pandemic.

According to Josh, capstone projects can also motivate students—even in the spring of their senior year—to stretch themselves to develop new skills and branch out into new areas of study in order to accomplish something that matters to them. For example, he tells the story of an art student who wanted to pursue video
game design, even though her strength was in art, not coding. “She was an avid gamer and felt that Native Americans were not well represented in video games, that they did a poor job of highlighting stories of her culture. She wanted to create a video game based on the origin story of her people to fix what she saw as lacking in the gaming industry.”

Just as the capstone course requires schools to redefine the role of the teacher, it also challenges traditional ideas about grading, especially the almost exclusive focus on final products. “Some students don’t finish the project during the capstone class because it’s something they want to do and keep doing.” A case in point is what Josh refers to as one of the most time-consuming projects he has encountered since the MVP class was launched: “A student rewrote a play with eight characters to be a one-woman show. She was a drama student and not a film student, so she chose a film teacher as her mentor. She filmed the play over the summer and invited teachers. It was harder than an AP course but without the credit. This is how you can get an A without finishing the project.”

In keeping with the core shifts of assessment for learning, learners’ capstone grades reflect the process of their learning as well as the product. According to Josh, students create their own rubrics, which they and their expert mentors use to monitor progress and assess the project. Josh explains, “I am not an expert in everything; I can grade them on ability to set goals and reflect, but I don’t grade the product.” Typically, he says, the MVP teacher meets with students every two weeks to have conversations about the process and get them to be reflective about their work and really think, talk, and evaluate the project. “I give a grade based on those conversations. [Students] also do a video log at the end of each week about the process. I might give prompts/tasks like ‘How well are you meeting your deadlines and why?’ The point is that they know why they are or are not. Part of this course is about having students know themselves better.”
As Jeremy recounts, the process of exploring what equitable, learner-centered, and personalized assessment and grading practices could look like at MVHS began years before COVID disrupted teaching and learning. From the first years of the PL Challenge, innovative teachers—or “cannon-ballers” as they are often called—had piloted new ways of assessing and grading in their own classrooms.

However, Jeremy says, new mindsets and practices “have caught on like wildfire in light of COVID. We all learned what the limitations were in terms of engaging students and also about students’ ability to show us what they knew in extremely unusual circumstances.” To him, the teaching and learning challenges posed by the pandemic “lent themselves well to taking a standards-based approach” to grading.

Rethinking assessment and redesigning grading systems is a major undertaking, one that will take time and collective effort. Educators at MVHS do not claim to have this aspect of their school’s personal learning model figured out, but they are finding their individual and collective why’s to do this work and are discovering how to accomplish it.

**Competency as the Goal.**

Although standards-based grading looks different based on the subject or context, MVHS educators who are piloting this approach all share a commitment to assigning grades that accurately communicate to what extent a student has learned essential content and skills, rather than reflecting completion of tasks or the quality of initial attempts. As Jeremy explains, “A standards-based approach focuses on constant feedback in the moment as well as opportunities for students to show us their learning in iterations. The final iteration—that last demonstration of learning—is going to be the mark that students earn in terms of how they have, or have not, reached these standards or these skills.”

Math teachers at MVHS have led the way in adopting standards-based grading. Stacy Eyton, the chair of the department, was one of the first cannonballers with respect to redesigning grading, in part based on her own experiences as a student. As she explains, “Even in math, it always took me a little bit longer to understand something. I thought about math a little bit differently, or I needed more time to explore something to truly understand it.

“When Mr. Chodola gives us options to revise, I feel like it’s not just, ‘Oh, you got this grade, now move on to the next.’ You can actually have a chance to go over your mistakes and fix them and see improvement in your writing or an assignment that you didn’t do too well on. You get a second chance in this. And I feel like it really has improved my writing.”

— Megan Luck, Grade 12 Student, MVHS
“In math, you have to know A to get to B. You can’t be successful with this concept, this idea, if you don’t understand how to do something prior. And so a lot of times when students start to have that negative emotion about their ability in math, it’s because they got stuck at this one idea or this one thing, and now they’re stuck and everybody else has moved on. And so they just give up, right? That’s where a lot of students are in math. They’ve just given up. I want the students to be more like, ‘Okay, let’s just try this out. Let’s go for this.’”

— Stacy Eyton, Math Department Chair, MVHS

And so I really value that we don’t reach the same destination at the same time, and we all take different routes to get to that destination.”

Stacy’s first steps in the direction of standards-based grading focused on assessments, offering learners multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery by retaking tests. She piloted this approach with a small group of students, using two gradebooks—one traditional and one standards-based—in order to perceive the effect on their grades. “I was looking at growth over time with their assessments,” Stacy recalls, “and if they were tested on something the second week and they didn’t get it, I tested them again, maybe five weeks later. I rewarded them for showing me that they understood it. I really saw the difference it made. If they didn’t get it one day, maybe next Monday they’ll understand it, and they can have the ability to show it and prove their understanding of it.”

As a result of the pilot, Stacy reports, one student who had failed math multiple times was able to experience success for the first time. “Just seeing the numbers for that one student,” she says, “told me that this was why I was doing it.”

Teachers in the social science department at MVHS have also embraced a standards-based approach to grading. For example, Robert, who teaches AP U.S. History as well as the MVP capstone course, focuses on key skills and standards and prioritizes growth and improvement in his grading practices. “Any of the assessments they do—reading, writing—they can resubmit them. I give them feedback, and they can resubmit it. I’ll regrade it and give them the score if they improve. Standards-based grading is really more accurate for deciding where students’ skills and understandings are. The validity really goes up.”

Reducing Bias and Promoting Equity.

As part of the district-wide work already underway to align assessment to personalized, equitable learning, VUSD is also applying an equity lens to grading practices, as explained by Amy Zilk, former assistant principal at MVHS and current co-chair of the Superintendent’s Council for Equity and Anti-Racism. According to Amy, this group of district and school leaders, school board members, educators, parents, and students is researching standards-based grading as part of its broad mandate to “look at all instruction, all areas and all the aspects of school through that equity lens and make sure that we’re providing students with everything they need to develop to their full academic and social potential.”
“We talked about student motivation, what really motivates students and what doesn’t,” Amy says. “We took a look at grading practices, and we recommended that our district start the conversations around mastery-based grading.” In partnership with national experts and informed by how districts like San Diego Unified have updated their grading policies, the council is “looking into what it would take to go to mastery-based grading—what the supports, including teacher training, would be.”

For Robert, equity is also at the forefront of reasons to adopt new approaches to grading. One inspiration for him was the book *Grading for Equity* by Joe Feldman, a gift from Nicole Allard, who was the MVHS principal at the time. Although he was aware of the work colleagues like Stacy were doing to transform their grading systems, his reaction, he recalls, was, “That’s great. Maybe someday.”

“And then we got shut down on March 13, 2020,” Robert recalls, “and I had two weeks to do nothing. And so I picked up *Grading for Equity* and read it in two days, and I said, well, how can I not do this now?” According to Robert, “The book takes a critical look at many practices that we use for convenience as teachers and really dismantles why we use them. Our reasons are not to the benefit of students—they’re to the benefit of us.”

Robert is particularly critical of the traditional practices like rigid deadlines and giving students zeroes for copying another’s homework, which he refers to as “an academic punishment for something that wasn’t really an academic choice. You are telling them that they are flawed and they are irredeemable just like that zero.”

Explaining what he sees as the connection between grading practices and academic integrity, Robert adds, “When work has a rigid due date, and they’re gonna get deducted or punished for it, students end up just copying each other before they come into class or literally in front of you when you are in class. And what do I do as a teacher? Absolutely nothing, because I was just collecting it for completion rather
than for them really engaging with it.” Instead, he tells learners, “If you want to take the time to do the learning, then you deserve the chance to turn it in.”

“In terms of equity,” he argues, “standards-based grades are more bias resistant. Whether or not we admit it, we teachers have relationships with students that are better or less developed than others. And we are going to make subjective decisions about students that impact that letter grade in the class. And when you use a traditional percentage-based system, there’s too many ways for that grade to be misrepresented. So instead of giving Johnny a break because you know what’s going on with his grandma, why aren’t these breaks and empathy and understanding just built into your grading systems?” In this way, he says, “Everyone gets the opportunity to do something because everyone’s life is on a slightly different personal track with hardships and successes, progress and setbacks. When you give [all students] opportunities to work and turn it in, they appreciate it, and it really builds trust and respect.”

### Student Agency.

According to MVHS educators, a key benefit of standards-based grading is that it takes the mystery out of assigning grades because learners know both what they are aiming for and where they stand relative to essential learning targets. Speaking for herself and colleagues who have adopted standards-based grading in math classes this year, Stacy says, “It is a very daunting task to totally change how you’re grading, and I think that first step for a lot of my teachers has been scary. But then, they’ve seen that, ‘Oh my gosh, this is actually easier. The students know exactly what they need to work on. Exactly what they need to improve on.’”

Moreover, learners also partner with Stacy to set their grades for the course using one-on-one conferences. She and the learners refer to a list of key skills and concepts, examine evidence of learning, and come to a consensus about a grade that represents each student’s “most consistent level of understanding.”

For Robert, standards-based grading is also motivational. Especially when coupled with student-friendly rubrics, he says, “You give a common language that expresses truly where their skills are with clear language of what it looks like to be more successful. You can give them feedback that zeroes in on where we’re seeing these skills working out or not working out. And when you allow them to do revisions or retakes or redos, it tells them, “Here is where you are here, and here is how you can improve your understanding and get to the next level of performance.”

Jeremy points to the importance of co-designing assessment with the learners themselves. Although they will need the support of educators, he maintains that students need to “co-create the success criteria so that they can take agency and ownership of the learning, and they can self monitor as they go along.” More broadly, he recommends “inviting students to the design table for as many elements of their school experience as possible. My experience has been that students are absolutely willing to share their insight. They want to help the adults in the building improve the learning environment for all students, and they will always—always—impress us with their solutions-oriented mindset. Students want to help us, and they know how; it’s our job to listen.”

— Liza Anits, Grade 12 Student, MVHS