
The Role of Online Grading Programs in School/Community Relations

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Abstract

This paper discusses online grading programs and their role in school/community relations. It also looks at the consequences from the lack of consistent communication among the school and the student and the parents. In order to gather the information about the use of online grading programs, surveys were distributed to Ten grade 12 students who are currently using online grading program and 20 teachers at a private international school in Bangkok, Thailand. The study finds out that implementing an online grading program, properly managed, can effectively and efficiently share timely information between the school and parents.

Introduction

Building and nurturing more effective school/community relations is an important part of raising a school's effectiveness at achieving its main goal – raising student achievement. Studies show that making the students, parents and community feel part of the school increases the effectiveness of the school and helps all parties involved. (Zygmunt-Fillwalk, 2006) Indeed, there are school/community relations of some form occurring all the time, whether school staff are aware of them or not. Students talk with their friends and families about what happened at school. Parents talk to other parents about their children's school. Teachers talk with each other about the students and

parents. A gap of mistrust is created, spread and widened because the parties talked about are not the parties being talked to.

Transparency in the education process keeps all parties accountable and aware of where the other parties stand. School buildings however, tend to be separated from the rest of the community. (Black and Wiliam, 1998) Students enter the building every day but in their lessons, there is often a disconnection between what their perception of their achievement is and their teachers' perception of their achievement. Students turn in lessons and may or may not get results and/or feedback from their teachers. The teacher keeps up with the students' progress but does not necessarily share that information with the students and certainly not with the parents until grades come out. There just is not enough time during the term to share individual grades with individual students and individual parents.

Thus, at grade time, there is normally a great deal of surprise. Students who do not get specific feedback from their teacher are surprised at their low grades. Parents, who get all their information about the student from the student, are equally surprised at the low grades. Teachers, who have experienced the lack of effort and/or understanding in the student and are not surprised at the student's grade, *are* surprised that the student and parents are surprised. This is not a positive form of surprise. This surprise is more in the form of misunderstanding and hurt feelings resulting from the lack of consistent communication among the school and the student and the parents. These hard feelings perpetuate a sense of mistrust among all parties.

Unfortunately, most school/community interaction is negative, whether it be the negative surprise mentioned above, a parent contact that results from a child's negative behavior or some other misunderstanding stemming from a lack of consistent communication.

While many teachers do not believe that grades should be the all-consuming factor that they are, the fact remains that students, parents and all other stakeholders seem to care more about grades than about anything else. Relatively simple Internet-based programs exist today that allow teachers to share not only their grade-books but also their attendance, assignments, suggested supplemental reading, instructional videos and other text that can be used to both promote student learning and also connect the school with the home. Grades are the "hook" that gets students and parents to participate in this communication. Students want and deserve to know how well or how poorly they are doing in school. Their parents want to know also. Giving them this "window" into the school workings not only helps students achieve more but also draws them and their parents into the school environment.

Schools use a variety of online grading programs and the more comprehensive "SIS," or "school information system." Apple's "PowerSchool" is an example of the latter. PowerSchool is expensive but can serve as a school's server and can handle school-wide attendance and other data. Several schools in the U. S. are currently using PowerSchool. "Engrade is an example of a less-complicated and free tool for calculating grades,

supplying real-time grades and giving access to other forms of information about a student's class.

A study done in 2002 (Hampton, L.F., Anderson, C., & Sigman, D. 2002) documented the use of the online SIS, "PowerSchool." Teachers used PowerSchool in three consecutive grading periods. In the first and third grading periods, seventy-seven out of one-hundred and thirty-seven grade six students were given extra access to the Internet at school and were required to monitor their grades online. Parents were shown how to use the system at a parent night and were encouraged to monitor their children's results. Students were encouraged but not required to monitor their progress via PowerSchool in the second quarter. Student GPAs were found to be significantly higher after the first and third quarters than they were after the second quarter. Reactions from both parents and children tended to be quite positive. (Hampton, Anderson, & Sigman, 2002)

Further testament to SIS success comes from an article entitled "Student Information Systems >> How Do You Spell Parental Involvement? S-I-S" written by Ken Bird. Bird is superintendent of Westside Community School, a school district in the Midwest of the United States. Bird cites evidence from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, (www.nwrel.org/index.html) and the US Department of Education (available at nces.ed.gov) among others to link the value of parent involvement to the power of SIS. He speaks glowingly of students and parents becoming

“PowerSchool ‘Junkies’” and of their close relationship to his schools as exemplified by their desire to check grades daily.

Not all feedback on the SIS is entirely positive however. In an article in the New York Times entitled, “I Know What You Did Last Math Class,” Jan Hoffman acknowledges that many schools and districts think highly of the SIS. She reports that principals say the SIS has helped connect parents and students who were difficult to reach in the past. However, she notes the downside also. She writes about the added stress and strain on the family caused by excessive monitoring of student grades. With increased competition for admission to colleges, parents feel they need to monitor and control their children’s school progress because they can check the SIS so easily and frequently. Parents can even opt for cell-phone email alerts. Of course some teens with a naturally growing desire to control their own lives resent their parents’ desires to control the teen’s lives. Because of the online aspect of grading, parents can see students’ grades even before the students can.

Although online grading programs are supported as being a mode for sharing information easily, teachers can find them a burden. Parents come to expect up-to-date maintenance of grades and, of course, attendance, and if a teacher falls behind, parents may get anxious and push for current updates. In the same vein, grading programs are not fix-alls for grade keeping. Teachers make mistakes. There are times when a large amount of data needs to be input in a short amount of time. The potential for mistakes grows at such

times. Online grading programs magnify teacher mistakes. The potential for a harmful situation exists if a teacher accidentally records a low grade for a student. An irate parent may punish a student for a low test mark that is a teacher mistake and the fault of the teacher's too-long day at work and not the fault of the student. While the mistake would almost surely be clarified the following school day, the unjust punishment would have been carried out and the teacher, student and parent would find themselves in an awkward situation.

Whether students agree with their parents' ease of access to students' grades or not, it is certain that the SIS systems and other online grading systems open up schools to parents and the community. Not only grades, but also homework schedules, lessons, etc. are readily available, via the SIS and Internet grading programs, to those granted permission. This online availability circumvents some of the logistics problems inherent in traditional methods of reaching out to the community. Grades written in a traditional paper grade-book stay isolated in the classroom. Even grades done on spreadsheet-type grade programs are not readily accessible to parents and students. Busy teachers may have to access a printer and make multiple copies of student grades. The problem of privacy then comes into play as individual student grades are required to be kept private. Having the grade-book posted online, available only by individual password, eliminates those logistics problems.

Communication other than grade reporting can be made more effective with online grade-reporting systems also. Because parents' work schedules often mirror school schedules, parents cannot normally visit the school when teachers are available. Busy teachers resist working extra, evening hours to accommodate busy parents. Teachers have little time during the school day to telephone parents, who are often just as reluctant to receive telephone calls, most of them negative, while they are at work. When teacher/parent contact is made, it is usually negative and it is often too late to affect real change. When grades and attendance data are available online, the parents can know about problems as soon as they happen and neither the parent nor the teacher need leave their desk.

Of course, parent/teacher contact need not always be negative. A parent, seeing a positive grade posted for a quiz, project or exam will know about the grade as soon as it is posted. Parents with children with attendance problems will be able to track their children from work, via the attendance feature. Online grading programs have a feature allowing two-way communication between teacher and student. Students can send questions about grades, homework, upcoming tests, etc. via the grading program. Teachers can send reminders to forgetful students. Study-guides, texts and even videos can be attached to the grading program. Students can use these features to learn more and parents can use them to see more clearly what their children are learning.

Such openness and transparency would certainly seem to improve school/community relations and thus improve student achievement. However, one must question exactly how much openness is too much openness. How accessible should student data be? How much is privacy an issue? Students are only allowed access to their own grades. Parents, via their password, are only allowed access to their children's grades, not the grades of other children. The SIS systems and other online grading systems, through their use of individual passwords, are designed to prevent privacy infringement. However, there have been occasions of glitches in grading programs wherein unauthorized persons have gained access to student data.

Keeping track of school events can be difficult for parents also. It is difficult for the school itself. Caring schools want parents and students to be aware of and plan to participate in school events. When events such as football games, open-house, school plays, "international day," "sports day," etc. are scheduled, schools want to get the message out to parents. When tutoring sessions, a new after-school club or a parent workshop is offered, the school wants all students and parents to know. Schools often communicate such information via letters sent home with students to parents. These letters do not always find their way to parents for many reasons. Some students are forgetful. Some students do not want to attend the foretold event or do not want their parents to attend the event. Parents lose the letter after the student gives it to them. In addition, large amounts of paper and ink are used in this

highly inefficient mode of communication. Information posted online is available whenever an Internet connection is available.

Surveys were distributed to students and teachers at a private international school in Bangkok, Thailand regarding the use of online grading programs. Ten grade 12 students who are currently using an online grading program were surveyed about their reaction to the use of the online grading program. The results of that survey are displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1

STUDENT ONLINE GRADING SYSTEM SURVEY

Engrade is an online grading program that calculates students' grades. Students can see their grades anytime they want by logging onto their account. A student can only view his or her own account. He or she cannot see other students' grades. Students can also check on homework assignments, upcoming events, and attendance using Engrade. Teachers can post assignments on Engrade that allow students to view the assignments and instructions anywhere they have Internet access.

1. I like being able to see my grades online.					
strongly agree	agree	don't care	disagree	strongly disagree	
8	2	0	0	0	/10
2. I think seeing my grades online helps me learn.					
strongly agree	agree	don't care	disagree	strongly disagree	
5	5	0	0	0	/10
3. I like having my assignments posted online.					
strongly agree	agree	don't care	disagree	strongly disagree	
3	5	2	0	0	/10
4. Having my assignments posted online helps me learn.					
strongly agree	agree	don't care	disagree	strongly disagree	
3	4	3	0	0	/10
5. I want my parents to be able to view my grades online.					
strongly agree	agree	don't care	disagree	strongly disagree	
1	1	3	3	2	/10
6. I think my parents would like to be able to view my grades online.					
strongly agree	agree	don't care	disagree	strongly disagree	
2	2	5	0	1	/10

7. My parents would view my grades online if they knew they could.					
strongly agree	agree	don't care	disagree	strongly disagree	
4	1	5	0	0	/10

8. Having my parents view my grades online would improve my learning.					
strongly agree	agree	don't care	disagree	strongly disagree	
2	5	0	2	1	/10

9. I think more of my learning should be online on a program like Engrade.					
strongly agree	agree	don't care	disagree	strongly disagree	
4	4	0	2	0	/10

10. I think more teachers should use online grading programs.					
strongly agree	agree	don't care	disagree	strongly disagree	
6	4	0	0	0	/10

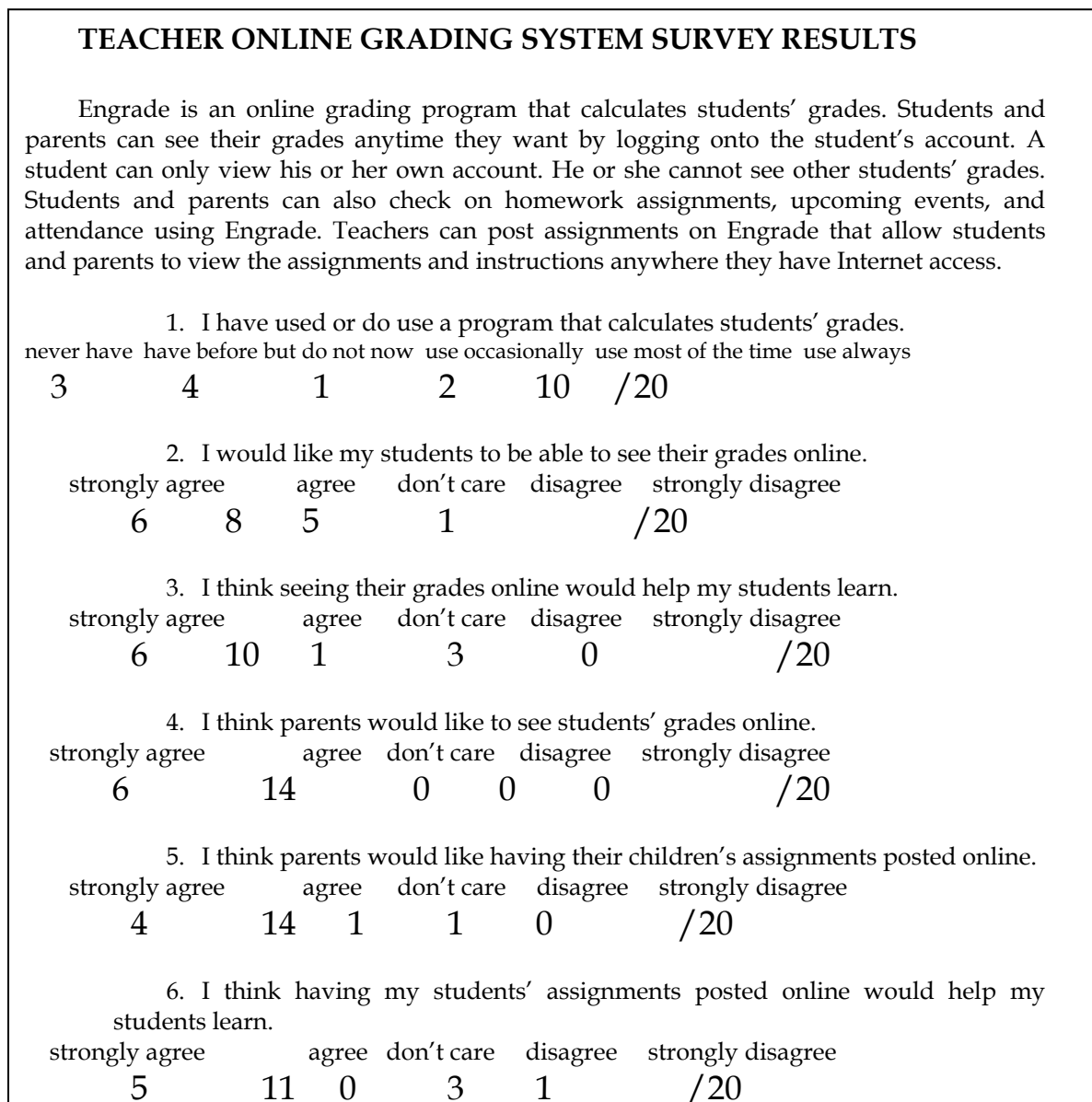
It is thought that schools having student grades posted online both

keeps students aware of their own progress and gives them a sense of ownership in their schoolwork. As can be seen in survey item number 1 in Figure 1, 100% of students who have been using the online grading program either agree or strongly agree that they like using it and believe it helps them learn. Having assignments posted online eliminates the "I forgot what my homework was" excuse and also makes assignments available to students who are absent. In survey item number 3 in Table 1, 80% of students either agree or strongly agree that they like having their assignments online and 70% agree or strongly agree that having their assignments online helps them learn. Fifty percent of students do not want their parents to be able to view the student's grades online, yet, as shown in question number eight, 70% believe that having their parents view their grades would help them learn. The most telling data, and the most reliable data, because of the overwhelming numbers, comes from question numbers nine and ten. Eighty percent of students surveyed agree or strongly agree that more of their

learning should be online on a program like PowerSchool or Engrade. It should be noted that these students have experienced Engrade for three quarter-long grading periods and have used it to keep up with their grades and to check for their homework assignments. Similarly, 100% of them agree or strongly agree that more teachers should use online grading programs.

Twenty teachers in the same international school were surveyed using a similar survey. The results of the teacher survey are in Figure 2.

Figure 2



7. I think parents would view their children's grades if they were online.					
never	once a month	once a week	more than once a week	every day	
0	8	11	1	0	/20
8. I think my students would like their parents to be able to view students' grades online.					
strongly agree	agree	don't care	disagree	strongly disagree	
0	5	3	10	2	/20
9. I would like to use or like using an online grading system.					
strongly agree	agree	don't care	disagree	strongly disagree	
9	8	3	0	0	/20
10. I would like more teachers to use online programs like Engrade.					
strongly agree	agree	don't care	disagree	strongly disagree	
5	8	6	1	0	/20

Teachers will have to be the most responsible and accountable in the use of online grading programs. According to survey item number 1, half of the teachers surveyed said they always use a program that calculates student grades. However, there is a difference between using a computer software program to calculate grades and providing those grades online, consistently and accurately to students and parents. Yet 70% of these teachers agree or strongly agree that they would like their students to be able to see their grades online and 80% believe that seeing grades online helps their students learn. Similarly, 80% think parents would like to see their children's grades online and 90% believe parents would like to see assignments online. Eighty percent of teachers believe having students' assignments online helps students learn. This high number could be a result of the perennial lament that students do not do their homework and thus are not prepared to learn in class. Survey item number 7 examines teachers' opinions about the frequency of parents viewing grades online. Interestingly, just over half replied they

believed parents would view their children's grades online weekly while 40% believe parents would view them monthly. This indicates that teachers believe parents would be very moderate in their monitoring. No teachers thought parents would check daily and none thought parents would never check. Exactly half the teachers marked that they do not believe students want their parents checking grades. This number almost exactly mimics the grade 12 student's reactions. Survey item number 9 indicates that 85% of teachers surveyed either like using or would like to use an online grading program. Thus, one can extrapolate that the vast majority of teachers believe it to be an effective tool for learning. Interestingly, a significantly smaller number, 65%, say they would like more teachers to use an online grading program.

Engrade is currently used by a small number of teachers at the Bangkok international school surveyed. Grades are posted in the grade-book and updated regularly. Assignments are posted on the calendar and updated regularly. Students are encouraged to check their grades for teacher input accuracy and to check their homework assignments. At this time, attendance is not posted on Engrade. At times, supplemental texts are posted. Examples of these supplemental texts are writing rubrics, outline templates, vocabulary lists, and URLs of reference websites. Students also use the message function to question grades, inquire about assignments, ask general questions, and send assignments via attachments.

Other Engrade features include a wiki application, an interactive flashcard application, an interactive quiz application and an online lesson

application called “Allthink” that includes video, text in the form of documents and/or Powerpoint presentations and short, comprehension-check type quizzes. All applications are relatively easy to apply but are entirely dependent upon a reliable Internet connection.

In summary, online grading programs can have a role in school/community relations. Properly managed, the online grading program can effectively and efficiently deliver timely information from the school to students and parents. Online grading programs are not difficult to set up and can be maintained with a minimum of effort. However, like all school reform, the use of an online grading system must be implemented thoughtfully and with determination. Teachers must all buy into the idea of an online grading system. Teachers must be trained to use the grading system effectively and efficiently. The office staff at the school should be assigned to keep up with posting accurate school events information in a timely, professional and attractive manner. The online grade-book will only be as effective as the teachers who use it.

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