I grade students all the time, and I put a lot of effort into doing a careful, thorough, accurate job of assigning grades. Why doesn’t this count as “assessment of student learning”? Joan Hawthorne – October 20, 2006

There are at least two ways to answer this question. The first is by analogy – consider the situation of high school teachers, for example. They also put a lot of time and effort into doing a good job of assigning grades. But college faculty frequently complain that grades students receive in K-12 are inappropriately high and give students an unrealistic picture of their learning. Those who see our students after they leave the university are no more confident in the meaningfulness of our grades than we are in the meaningfulness of grades given by high school teachers. In fact, when we admit students to our graduate programs, we usually want to see a test score, like the GRE, too. So maybe we don’t put a lot of stock in college grades either.

And, in all fairness, grades serve many purposes and credit toward grades can be earned in various ways. For example, grades may be intended to reinforce activities we believe are linked to learning (e.g., credit for participating in an in-class activity). But participation grades are not intended as measures of learning.

The second way of answering this question is by considering the difference between grading and assessing. With grades, we’re interested in segmenting out the performance of a specific student, and then aggregating in all aspects of that student’s performance for the semester. With assessment, we’re interested in segmenting out performances on a specific learning goal, and then aggregating in all students’ performances on that goal.

Sometimes these different focuses are at cross-purposes. For example, in an exam in American History, there may be excellent reasons to include multiple choice questions that ask students to identify names of Civil War generals, along with places and outcomes of key battles. But the intended learning outcomes in that same American History class might be phrased in much broader terms: “Goal One: Students will be able to analyze the significance of the Civil War as a turning point in American culture and politics.”

Of course, sometimes we have grading practices (test questions, paper assignments, etc.) that are clearly aligned with specific learning goals, allowing us to use student work products (tests, papers, projects) for both grading and assessment (although the two processes are still not interchangeable). Maybe there’s another goal in that American History course, perhaps worded like this: “Goal Two: Students will develop a familiarity with key events and people from pre-20th century American history.” Data from the multiple choice questions about generals and battles could well be one source of evidence regarding achievement of this knowledge goal, although a teacher would probably want to look at overall student performance on a sampling of questions covering a broader range of topics than generals and battles in order to fully assess relevant student learning.

For either sample outcome, student performance on different test questions might be analyzed to determine how well students had achieved course goals. However, there are goals that are still larger and more overarching for the program as well, and assessing
learning in relation to the History major is usually more complex than looking at learning in a single class – so it becomes all the more important to separate grading (specific to individual courses) from assessment of learning (applicable to the entire degree program).

So the bottom line is this: It’s possible to use information gained from some activities for both grading and assessment. But they are not interchangeable activities. Both are important. Grading, done well, tells an individual student (and us) how well he or she is doing on activities that should aid the student’s learning within a particular class. Assessment, done well, tells us what our students in general are learning related to specific goals. Sure, they’re passing our classes. But are they achieving the intended learning by the time they complete a course or a program of study, or are they so bogged down by individual trees that they’re missing the forest entirely? And how do we know? Answering these questions gets us back to what’s at the heart of higher education – and opens the door to productive discussions that can result in genuine program improvement.