

JumpRope Hates Grades

NEW YORK, October 10, 2012 — *Jesse Olsen is the founder and CEO of JumpRope, which offers tools and professional development that challenges schools and teachers to innovate in their practices and culture. This is the story of his company and insight into the question on everyone's mind: what's wrong with education these days?*

The history of JumpRope reads a bit like the plot of a tear-jerking movie about teachers and the students who taught them; but having lived it, I can say that the important part is hidden behind the drama. I was teaching math at a public high school in the Bronx, and found myself in the middle of a powerful cultural revolution as our school attempted to reinvent education—at least in our little corner of the world—to become relevant.

The problem that we were trying to solve was daunting, and our solution was equally ambitious: we wanted to shift the learning paradigm from telling students what they've done, to showing them what they know. Our plan involved throwing out traditional grades completely in favor of a system that was more specific, more timely, more proactive, and ultimately more honest. Educators label this new system standards-based grading, though the term can have more than one meaning. My view was and is that traditional "grades" are a relic from times past, and that the broken system of motivation that they prop up is in fact one of the most significant cultural barriers that education must break out of before it can begin to be relevant in the 21st century. We not only needed to change the nature of the feedback that we gave to students, but we also needed to gather and communicate more specific and frequent data.

My background in computer engineering made it abundantly clear to me that such a revolution would require some serious systems to stay organized and efficient. A survey of the technology available to us, however, was not encouraging—tools were either static monoliths that did a lot more to maintain the status quo than they did to innovate, or they were too far from the reality of public schools to be practical.

Seeing as how I had a few weeks off every summer, I did what any crazy person would have done: I wrote my own standards-based gradebook. Like many similar projects, it began as a heavily scripted and web-connected Excel spreadsheet, then it grew and grew as my fellow teachers demanded more. The program evolved into a cross-platform installable application, and eventually emerged as a web application. Dozens of staff and hundreds of students quickly began to rely on it as the the primary data system in the school, and I began to learn what it meant to operationalize a mission-critical system the hard way... and without pay!

Amazingly, and to my enduring pride and humility, our efforts began to work: we successfully changed the language and motivational structures in our school such that students and teachers alike were more informed of academic strengths and weaknesses, and each had clear next steps towards learning. Of course, the technology system was only a small part of this shift... but it was something that I could share. Over the next few years, as more and more schools visited and asked us *how*, it became abundantly clear that the program I created was not just a time-saver and a nifty feature, it was a game changer. With JumpRope, schools could take their goals to the next level and use the tools to leverage cultural change, for the sake of the students. It was on this energy with a devotion to standards-based grading that I began to build JumpRope.

Much like the story that brought us to this point, the story that continues at JumpRope is ambitious, risky, and revolutionary. The change we see coming in education is what brings us into the office every day, keeps us on the phone and in the classroom, and forces us to ask every day: how can we do it better?

About JumpRope

JumpRope helps educators implement standards-based grading in every classroom through innovative assessment and feedback. We provide the web-based platform that great teachers and schools need to engage students with active pedagogy, purposeful planning, and authentic learning experiences. With the tools to make standards-based grading easy, teachers are freed to create, propel and inspire; and students become lifelong learners.

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