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ABSTRACT

Developing meaningful and equitable grading practices is a daily challenge for K-12 educators and administrators. Grading practice serves several functions, including informing parents about their child's progress, informing potential employers, aiding in educational and career planning, and guiding administrative decisions such as graduation, promotion, and honors. This chapter covers five topics related to criterion-referenced grading practice: the imperative relationship between grading practice and learning objectives; the use of grading practice as a learning tool for students as well as an evaluative tool; validity in classroom grading practice, including the importance of using a variety of evaluative measure; creativity in classroom grading practice; and tough issues in the assessment and grading of cooperative learning activities and performances by students with special abilities. (Contains 22 references.) (GCP)

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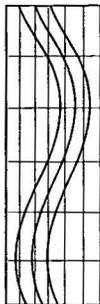
Beyond Assessment to Best Grading Practice: Practical Guidelines

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Chapter 36

Beyond Assessment to Best Grading Practice

Practical Guidelines

Laurie A. Carlson

Developing meaningful and equitable grading practices is a daily challenge for K–12 educators and administrators. Part of the difficulty in understanding the complicated mechanisms behind grading lies in the confusion surrounding terminology (Speck, 1998). Assessment and grading are related but not exactly the same. For the purposes of this chapter, *assessment* refers to the objective process of evaluation and involves specific tools such as tests and portfolios. *Grading practice*, on the other hand, represents the sometimes subjective, but accepted, process of assigning value to student performance on the assessment tools (Speck, 1998). *Grade reporting* involves disseminating the resulting information about student performance to the student, parents, administrators, and other appropriate parties. In this chapter, *grading practice* refers to the combination of grading practice and grade reporting.

Grading practice serves several functions, including informing parents about their child's progress, informing potential employers, aiding in educational and career planning, and guiding administrative decisions such as graduation, promotion, and honors (Gredler, 1999; Hendrickson & Gable, 1997). An educator may be very knowledgeable and savvy regarding assessment procedures but experience difficulty in translating assessments into appropriate grading practice. Norm-referenced, self-referenced, and criterion-referenced assessments represent the three possible frameworks for grading practice; however, criterion-referenced assessment emerges as the most widely accepted practice (Gredler, 1999). This chapter covers five topics related to criterion-referenced grading practice: (a) the imperative relationship between grading practice and learning objectives; (b) the use of grading practice as a learning tool for students as well as an evaluative tool; (c) validity in classroom grading practice, including the importance of using a variety of evaluative measures; (d) creativity in classroom grading

practice, including alternative assessment and constructivist approaches such as portfolios and field projects; and (e) tough issues in the assessment and grading of cooperative learning activities and performances by students with special abilities.

Learning Objectives: The Grading Foundation

Learning standards and learning objectives are often used interchangeably but are subtly different terms. In general, *learning standards* are broad statements of essential knowledge, and *learning objectives* represent specific learning goals for students in a particular learning environment. Meaningful learning objectives based upon accepted learning standards are pivotal to standards-based evaluation and serve as benchmarks for evaluating student performance in a criterion-referenced grading strategy (Colby, 1999; Gredler, 1999; Marzano, 1999; Speck, 1998). Educators must carefully consider the quality of learning objectives because they play such a critical role in grading. Several characteristics are central to the utility of quality learning objectives in grading practice: Learning objectives must be (a) directly related to content, (b) written in clear language that students can understand, and (c) clearly measurable. Learning objectives that demonstrate these characteristics are pivotal to the difference between meaningful and inappropriate teaching strategies and evaluation. When learning standards form the basis for evaluation, the entire system becomes more learner-centered (Colby, 1999).

Grading That Enhances Student Learning

Students may learn important knowledge and skills not only during didactic instruction but also through authentic assessment procedures designed around learning objectives (Moorcroft, Desmarais, Hogan, & Berkowitz, 2000; Smith, Smith, & DeLisi, 2001; Travis, 1996). It seems that what distinguishes evaluative tools that enhance learning from those that do not is the importance of the evaluation to the student. It would be erroneous to suggest that all students value the same experiences; therefore, it is important to consider strategies for increasing the meaning that students will ascribe to an evaluative tool. When students are asked to become an active part of grading strategies, those strategies may become more meaningful, may actually enhance learning, and subsequently may better represent student achievement (Benson, 2000; Rafferty, Leinenbach, & Helms, 1999). One method of

increasing student ownership of grading practice is to negotiate learning contracts with students (Stix, 1997). Constructivist educational strategy provides a philosophical foundation for classroom practice that increases students' responsibility for their own performance and speaks directly to the issue of increasing students' ownership of their own educational experience.

Constructivism, founded on the principle of learning through experience, assesses student achievement as learning emerges from ongoing study (Ediger, 2000). In a constructivist environment, students essentially "construct" their own learning experiences. Constructivist classrooms often provide a framework for grading practices that engage students in establishing their own learning objectives and evaluation methods. Common characteristics of constructivist grading practice include student choice regarding tasks to be completed, student self-evaluation, and teacher relinquishment of control (Anderson, 1998). The use of constructivist learning policies in a traditional educational environment poses some unique challenges, which educators must be aware of before implementation to avoid failure. Anderson (1998) identifies challenges in (a) possible modification of existing instructional strategies, (b) implementation of both formative and summative evaluation, (c) instructor guidance during student development of rubrics, and (d) balance among instructor, peer, and self-evaluation.

Validity Through Variety

It is common knowledge among professionals in the test development field that a greater number of items often increases the content validity of an instrument. Likewise, in empirical research limited sample size significantly decreases validity in hypothesis testing. So it is in classroom grading practice. The number and variety of assessment measures employed affect the validity of a student's grade. Take, for example, a seventh grader who struggles with severe test anxiety. It is highly unlikely that a social studies grade determined solely on unit and comprehensive multiple-choice exams will adequately measure what that student has learned in the course. Similarly, a student with motor delay would be unfairly disadvantaged in a physical education class that assigns a pass-fail grade solely on the student's ability to perform during the Presidential Physical Fitness routine. A wide variety of assessment protocols exists, including traditional exams, creative projects, written or narrative works, group assignments, portfolios, and naturalistic assessment techniques. All these protocols present unique

advantages and disadvantages, and it is the educator's responsibility to explore and understand the characteristics of each before implementing any of them.

Variety Requires Creativity

Beyond the need for teachers to have an empirical and professional understanding of available protocols, true variety in assessment calls for a noteworthy level of creativity. One common mistake educators make regarding this issue is underuse of the creative energy of students themselves. Even very young students have the ability to conceptualize and express appropriate strategies for performance evaluation (Rafferty et al., 1999).

Several new paradigms in assessment—including alternative assessment, authentic assessment, performance assessment, portfolio assessment, and natural classroom assessment—have recently come to the forefront of the literature and add a creative spark to grading practices (Kohn, 1999; Moorcroft et al., 2000; Smith et al., 2001). Although such strategies hold considerable promise, they also pose unique challenges, including the needs for adequate educator training and clear communication with parents and students (Anderson, 1998; Benson, 2000; Kohn, 1999). One resource to help educators communicate with parents and explain to them assessment tools that enhance learning is *But Are They Learning? A Commonsense Parents' Guide to Assessment and Grading in Schools* by Richard Stiggins and Tanis Knight (1997).

Portfolio Assessment

Portfolio assessment is growing rapidly as a viable tool in the evaluation of student performance (Lustig, 1996; Moorcroft et al., 2000; Rafferty et al., 1999; Spence & Theriot, 1999; Wolfe, 1999). Recent advances in technology and student record-keeping have contributed to this increased viability. Some of the same considerations inherent in traditional grading should be in place for portfolio assessment. First, it is important that the student see a clear connection between portfolio requirements and learning objectives. Second, portfolios that represent work completed over a substantial period and that serve a future purpose are generally better received by students and tend to produce more student effort. Third, when students are involved in making decisions regarding the appearance and content of portfolios, the quality of finished portfolios tends to increase. Finally, for portfolios to be generally accepted as an appropriate evaluative tool, parents, students, and administrators need to understand the purpose and unique value of

this type of assessment (Lustig, 1996; Spence & Theriot, 1999). Implementing portfolio assessment as one strategy in an overall grading policy can be time-consuming and costly. It is therefore imperative that the classroom teacher invest the energy up front to build a strong support network for portfolio use.

Exhibitions and Field Projects

Science has much to teach other disciplines regarding meaningful performance evaluation through public exhibitions. Many young people who rush through daily homework assignments will spend an extensive amount of time doing experiments and creating exhibits for science fairs. All at some level we all crave recognition and encouragement for the work we do, and students at all developmental levels are no exception. Further, the ability to represent completed work appropriately and effectively is a necessary life skill that students may learn through such an experience. Field experiences and exhibitions, like portfolios (Ediger, 2000), represent constructivist grading practices that present all the advantages and challenges discussed earlier. In general, exhibitions and field experiences provide opportunities for students to learn through the completion of the task itself and to encounter a great degree of flexibility and autonomy in producing a final product.

Tackling the Tough Evaluation Issues

Effective grading practice relies on equitable and appropriate evaluation. Evaluation becomes especially difficult in the face of cooperative learning activities and students with special needs. Alternative assessment often takes the form of collaborative activities and projects. There is little disagreement in the literature that collaborative projects and activities present advantages related to more engaged learning in a social context and acquisition of transferable life skills such as communication, responsibility, leadership, problem solving, and delegation of tasks (Butcher, Stefani, & Tario, 1995; Cheng & Warren, 2000; Pitt, 2000). On the other hand, educators at both the K-12 and university levels have become painfully aware of the possible grading nightmares associated with group projects.

Cheng and Warren (2000) note a common student complaint that assigning one blanket grade to everyone in the group is unfair, and indeed in many cases it is. Educators are notorious for believing the best about students and for relying on students' motivation and individual sense of responsibility to ensure equal participation in

collaborative projects. This may lead to assigning blanket grades that reward noncontributors to the same degree as students who assumed the bulk of responsibility for the project (Butcher et al., 1995). One solution to this issue is involving students in evaluating the contributions of their peers. A variety of issues concerning standards and confidentiality surface in peer assessment, but a number of good resources are available in the literature to inform best practice. One recent resource is an article by Cheng and Warren (2000) that outlines a rather straightforward approach to peer assessment of individual contributions to a group project. Another possible solution to assessment of group projects involves the application of games theory (Pitt, 2000). Whatever strategy an educator employs, it is imperative to be able to articulate clearly to students, administrators, and parents the rationale and procedure for grading, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of the strategy.

Closely related to the issues present in the evaluation of group projects are issues related to the evaluation of performances by students who are either gifted or have special needs. The movement from pullout learning environments to inclusive education pushes this issue to the forefront of the grading discussion. Traditionally, educators' response has been to implement dual grading standards based upon individualized education plans (IEPs) and other criteria, but such a strategy is appropriate only when those procedures do not put any students at an unfair advantage or disadvantage (Hendrickson & Gable, 1997). This leads back to the question, What, then, is the appropriate strategy when grading students with differing abilities? Part of the solution resides in the earlier discussions related to letting students themselves take responsibility for grading criteria and policies. This active student participation would ideally be present throughout the entire process—from decisions regarding the characteristics of the activity to its evaluation. Active participation appears to hold the greatest promise for implementation of a grading policy that meets the needs of all students, from the gifted to the academically challenged (Buckner, 1997; Rafferty et al., 1999).

Conclusion

Appropriate and equitable grading practice is not a simple matter. It requires a great deal of knowledge, skill, and understanding on the part of educators. In spite of a small politically driven cohort calling for the abandonment of all grading policy within public education,

grading still stands as the premiere method of informing students, parents, educators, administrators, and community stakeholders regarding an individual student's acquisition of essential skills and knowledge. It is at the base of accountability for public education. Because of its importance in the educational system, K–12 educators and administrators must invest the requisite time and energy to fully understand grading policy and to implement best practice. As outlined in this chapter, best practice is reflected in authentic student assessment that is directly related to learning objectives, expresses variety and creativity, and involves constructivist principles such as deep student involvement throughout the entire process.

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