Learning-Centered GRADING PRACTICES

It's a matter of fairness: Students' grades should accurately reflect what students know and are able to do. Inconsistencies across schools, classrooms and departments can lead to inequities for students.

The research on grading practice over two decades is clear: grading practices are firmly held beliefs that are near and dear to the teaching professional. You will not likely find a more emotional topic than classroom grading policy in the secondary school faculty meeting, and neither scholarship nor common sense have influenced teacher opinion or grading policies in many schools.

At a time when government, business and industry and the general public are calling for an accountability of student knowledge and abilities, classroom assessment practices could be significantly undermining the multiple efforts of schools across the country. In short, grades don't seem to accurately account for what students know and are able to do, and the inconsistency across schools, classrooms and even within one academic department can lead to gross inequities for students.

While teachers have little control over the state-mandated tests they must administer, they do have control over many day-to-day measures, including how classroom assessment is implemented, and their own grade books and what is recorded in them. Often times, as Douglas Reeves reminds us, the difference between failure and the honor roll depends on the grading policies of the teacher (Reeves, 2008).

What the research shows

Marzano (2000) and Guskey and Bailey (2001) have synthesized decades of research and summarize that grading practices vary greatly among teachers even in the same school, and practices supported by research are rarely in evidence. This summary includes:

- Grades often consists of a medley of attitude, effort and achievement.
- Teachers vary considerably in their grading practice and in their consideration

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of nonachievement factors when determining grades (effort, ability, conduct, attendance).

• Grades are something students earn as compensation for work completed rather than indicators of academic achievement.

• Because teachers are concerned with student motivation, self-esteem, and the social consequences of giving grades, using student achievement as the sole criteria for determining grades is rare.

Ultimately, teacher practice regarding grading is deeply rooted in what an individual teacher thinks is "fair," not what will improve, or accurately reflect, student achievement. But many of the grading practices in force today are, in fact, unfair and demoralizing, especially to higher ability students. An average or above-average student who works below his ability level is most likely to get the lower grade based on a perception of effort, while lower achieving students get a break if there is sufficient effort to justify it.

A minimum grading system

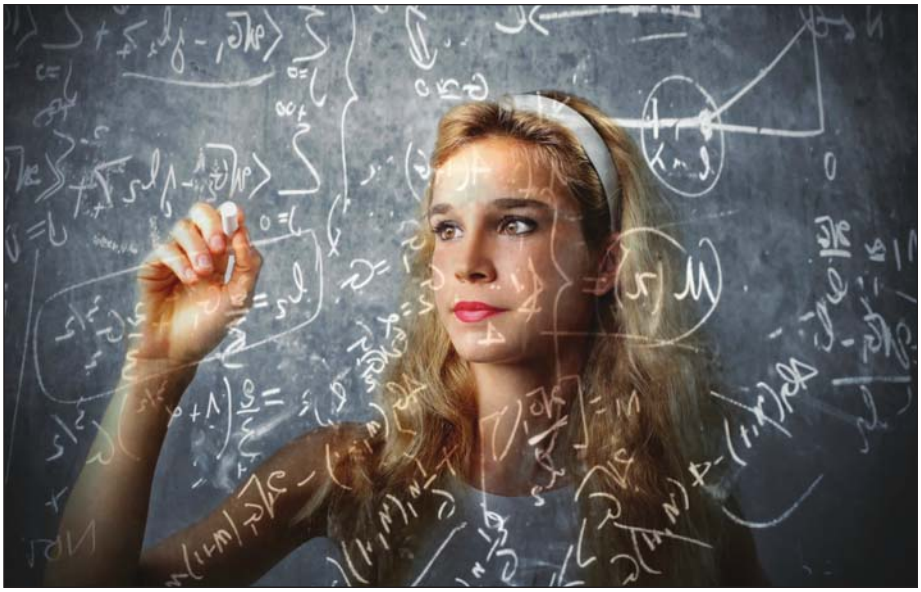
An issue gaining more exposure within the topic of grading is the number of educators who have come to the conclusion that assigning zeroes for grades is no longer an acceptable practice because of mathematical errors. There are varying implementations, but the concept requires that teachers utilize equal intervals within their grading and point system. In the most common 100-point scale, where 90 and above equates to an A, and 80 and above equates to a B, equidistant intervals would call for a C to be assigned 70 points, a D 60 points, and an F would be assigned 50 points.

Support for the minimum grading system lies simply in the mathematics of it all, that a grade of F with 0 points is six times worse than a grade of D, and recovering one's overall grade after a score of zero is averaged into the total is nearly impossible.

Despite the mathematical logic, critics report great disagreement with assigning anything but a 0 for an F grade, with the argument that the policy can unfairly reward students with points they have not earned, and stifle motivation to work harder. That is the opposite of the intended effect, which is to give students a fighting chance at grade improvement over time and to create consistency and fairness between schools (Ventura, 2011).

Supporters, however, argue that minimum grading keeps students engaged and contributes positively to student motivation.

Although school policies rarely discuss grading in such terms, grades affect student confidence, self efficacy, motivation and future performance (Docan, 2006). Recognizing those secondary effects leads to a greater appreciation of minimum grading and an awareness of the subpopulations of students who could benefit from the practice, particularly in certain "high-risk" courses and subjects.



The research clearly indicates that grading practice may not elicit a true picture of what a student knows at the point a grade is given. Teachers commonly use three grading policies that have been labeled as toxic (Reeves, 2008). First, despite evidence that grading as punishment does not work and the mathematical flaw in the use of the zero on a 100-point scale, defenders claim that students need to have consequences for failing to turn work in on time. If a student is earning As on tests, but receives a number of zeroes for missing assignments, will his final grade of averaged scores actually reflect his content knowledge?

This same grading mentality is the cause for the second ineffective practice, including missed class, attitude, behavior and undone homework into the final course grade. Delivering consequences for perceived irresponsibility is claimed as the reason for including these mishaps into the final grade, though none of these factors provide evidence for the acquisition – or lack of acquisition – of the course content.

The third practice in question is averaging every grade throughout the semester into the final grade. If teachers aim to reflect at the end of the semester what content the student knows and understands at the end of the semester, despite student struggles along the way, grading processes would need to change. Perhaps there is another way to communicate the journey.

Survey of current California teachers

A survey of teachers was performed by this researcher, with a sample population including teachers in second through 12th grade classrooms, both public and private. A total of 250 were sent the survey and 167 teachers responded, from 18 schools across San Diego County. Of the 167 respondents, 87 percent represent teachers in grades 6 through 12.

An electronic survey consisting of 10 multiple-choice questions asked teachers to describe the extent to which they emphasized different assessment and grading practices. Specifically, the research questions asked to what degree teachers:

• considered non-academic factors in the

calculation of a final course grade (homework submission, attendance, behavior and attitude);

• considered final acquisition of knowledge on the topic, rather than failures along the way, in the calculation of a final course grade;

• allowed missed homework or other assignments to affect the calculation of a final course grade, even if test data showed the student had proficient knowledge of the topic;

• used specific written feedback on exams to enhance student learning; and

• allowed exam re-takes to capture new student understanding after feedback was given.

Consistencies with past research

This researcher found several consistencies with past research: 1. The majority of teachers surveyed use several non-academic factors in the calculation of a final course grade. 2. Most teachers average every score earned regardless of final understanding of the content. 3. Assigning a zero for missing work is a prevalent practice, mathematically misrepresenting student understanding of the content. 4. Allowing students to retake exams after corrective feedback is given is rare.

What else the survey found

Regarding the use of non-academic factors in the calculation of a final course grade, the survey found:

• 93 percent include homework *submission* (not accuracy) in the calculation of a final course grade;

• 28 percent include behavior in the calculation of a final course grade;

• 29 percent include their perception of the students' attitude in the calculation of a final course grade; and

• 31 percent include attendance in the calculation of a final course grade.

None of these factors consider the students' actual acquisition of the intended learning outcomes of the course.

Regarding averaging every score earned, including zeros for assignments not turned in, regardless of final understanding of the content, the survey found:

• 64 percent of respondents said they average all scores toward the calculation of a final grade, while 71 percent believe that failures along the way *should* be included (7 percent of respondents are, therefore, operating under a policy they do not agree with).

• 15 percent reported some variation of practice between averaging all scores and not averaging all scores (examples: dropping the lowest grade, changing the final grade to the grade the student earned on the final, weighting the midterm and final grade)

• 84 percent of respondents calculate into the final grade a score of zero for missing work.

This study also found that 35 percent of respondents include corrective feedback on half or more of the assignments turned in by their students, designed to improve student performance, but only 25 percent allow students to retake one or more exams after corrective feedback is delivered.

Recommendations for schools and districts

1. **Every final course grade should be based on content standards and academic achievement only.** Consider that the academic grade only represents the actual learning outcomes the student has acquired through systematic and consistent implementation of grading policy shared by all faculty in the school and district. A second grade can be reflective of the character and dispositions of the student, to include responsibility, completion of assigned work, attitude, behavior and effort.

We must recognize that our students can be, at the very same time, both academically competent and dispositionally challenged, and those qualities must be reported separately for two reasons: to record accurate data that is easily interpreted, and to be able to intervene effectively with students based on what the students' true needs are – academic or dispositional.

2. **The practice of assigning minimum grades should be implemented,** prohibiting teachers from issuing grades lower than a minimum threshold – often set at 50. Consider as well eliminating the practice of averaging all scores to determine a final grade. A few low scores along the way as student understanding is evolving causes a lower overall grade at the end, even though the final understanding of content has been achieved.

3. **Schools and districts should implement policy around the teaching practice of providing specific feedback to students** and the opportunity to improve a work product based on feedback. Research widely supports the enhanced learning that takes place when their deficits are communicated and students have an opportunity to improve their product (Stiggins, 2005).

4. **Educators should share their understanding of the powerful effect of consistency, clear criterion, feedback and extinguishing the gate-keeper mentality** within our classroom grading systems (Reeves, 2008). This researcher found that there are a number of teachers whose grading practice is standards based and learning centered. Provide a forum for these teachers to share their insights with colleagues and lead the effort to develop improved policies.

Students who have more control over the grade they receive experience greater success, enhanced morale and improved behavior

(Guskey & Bailey, 2001). The recommended changes in grading policy would reduce the resources needed for remedial courses, course repetitions and summer school and allow those resources to be invested in electives and advanced courses, a much-needed benefit to entire school systems. ■

References

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