

How Many Points Is This Worth?

Craig Huhn

As any practicing teacher knows, assessment means much more than a one-time multiple-choice test, despite what the media and government seem to believe. For a teacher who wants his or her students to learn big ideas and gain long-term understanding, assessment means being keenly aware of what students know and understand, having sufficient evidence of this understanding, and offering a grade that accurately reflects this.

Few teachers disagree with this characterization of assessment. Yet somewhere along the way, the process of grading has lost its focus on what really is important: evaluating what students know, understand, and are able to do.

Teachers often lament their students' myopic focus on grades. Frustration mounts when students ask questions like, "How many points will this be worth?" rather than "What should we be thinking about when we do this?" What continues to surprise me is the way we teachers complain about students' attitudes yet continue to systematically reinforce this model.

I don't believe the problem lies with losing track of what grading and assessment are supposed to mean; the problem arises when our American zest for capitalism bleeds over into our schools.

In such a scenario, the more points—or capital—students accumulate, the more successful we consider them. In general, this seems like a logical, practical way to quantify the knowledge and understanding that students demonstrate. But this system can be considered legitimate only if the points actually represent some kind of advancement of knowledge.

To illustrate the misuse of the point system, consider the food drive that my high school holds each fall. In a well-meaning attempt to encourage motivation for a good cause, some teachers offer extra credit to students who bring in cans of food to donate. Aside from the fact that not all students have an equal opportunity to boost their grade—some of the

recipients of the local food bank attend our school—think about the message that this practice sends to kids about the meaning of "points." It shifts their focus away from demonstrating what they have learned and toward collecting as many points as possible.

Consider a more subtle example. During an interdisciplinary staff meeting, I asked for input from my colleagues on how to increase student motivation on a writing task. Their

response was, "Make it worth more points." Although in a practical sense such an action may scare students into completing the assignment, it also reinforces the idea that students are only in class to accumulate points.

After years of getting the message that success means collecting more points, it's not surprising that students play the "school game." For example, during the week before progress reports are sent

home, some students attempt to boost their grade by asking for an extra-credit assignment worth an inordinate number of points. Students seem unaware that artificially boosting an assignment's point value abstracts the grade to being nothing more than a symbol of accumulated "wealth," totally unrelated to an understanding of the course topics.

Many teachers also seem to have fallen prey to this phenomenon. A grade of 75%, for example, should not mean that a student has completed enough work to accumulate three-fourths of the points offered. Rather, the grade should show that the student understands roughly three-fourths of the ideas, or has a sufficient (although incomplete) understanding of most of the ideas.

We need to communicate to students that their goal should be knowing more when they walk out of a class than when they walked in it. We need to replace comments like "You



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have to do this to pass" with explanations of how the task will help students understand the concept at hand.

It may take a long time for students to unlearn what they have learned from their experiences with assessment before stepping into our classrooms. But a continued emphasis on grades as measures of learning rather than as accumulated capital may eventually change their perceptions about their roles in school. When they recognize that the tasks teachers set them are designed to help them advance their understanding, they will begin to see their grades as a result of the knowledge they have gained.

Only then will students be able to internalize the concept that their ultimate goal is to *learn* something. Only then will future generations truly understand what learning and assessment are all about. Only then will we be able to have a national conversation about how to make schools accountable for what their students are able to do. **EL**

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