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Grading to Communicate

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Grades can only be a shiny distraction—unless we make them a strong message.

Throughout my career as an educator, I have experienced frustration with how my traditional classroom grading practices have influenced my students' learning. When I discuss this issue with colleagues, parents, and—most important—students, I find that I am not alone in my frustration. Paradoxically, grades detract from students' motivation to learn. It is time to reconsider our classroom grading practices.

Does Grading Interfere with Learning?

As a young teacher, I found the authority to give grades empowering. The grade was my ace in the hole, providing the leverage needed to entice students to cooperate. But as time passed, it dawned on me that the manner in which I was using grades conflicted with my deeper purposes as an educator. Again and again, students met my passion for a subject with their pragmatic concern for their grade. I wanted my economics students to wrestle with issues of equity or debate the costs and benefits of a minimum wage; they wondered whether the upcoming test would be essay or multiple-choice. I wanted my sociology students to consider the powerful role that group attachments play in personal decisions about religion or romance; they cared more about how many pages they would need to write for the essay.

I wanted my students to wonder, to understand, and ultimately to be changed. Many of them simply wanted a good grade. And the irony is, they were only responding as other educators and I had conditioned them to respond. We had trained them to see grades as a commodity rather than as a reflection of learning.

Comments from a student panel that my school district organized to investigate grading practices further elucidated the problem. Students reported that they see their schoolwork as a game they play for grades—a game that at best treats learning as incidental, and at worst distracts students from making meaning. One student referred to this grade game as academic bulimia: Students stuff themselves with information only to regurgitate it for the test, with little opportunity for the thoughtful engagement that would produce deep understanding and growth.

Do Grades Measure What We Value Most?

I recall telling my students, "Work hard and your grade will be fine." Although I did not realize it, the message to students was clear: My unconscious curriculum was one of compliance.

Rather than Principles and Practices of Economics, my class might more accurately have

been named Principles and Practices of Being a Good Kid. Some students received good grades and learned little; others learned much and failed. Grades measured students' willingness to cooperate and work hard rather than their understanding of economics or their ability to use that understanding to think more clearly about their world. I was not assessing the learning that I valued most.

Do Grades Provide Accurate Feedback?

When grades are not deliberately connected to learning, they provide little valuable feedback regarding students' academic strengths and weaknesses, and can even be counterproductive. I recently spoke with a frustrated father whose daughter is on the honor roll at her high school. He finds that despite her hard work and high grades, his daughter's writing skills are deficient. He is having a difficult time convincing this honor student that her skills need improvement. Rather than supporting learning, her grades are actually providing misleading information.

A colleague's experience reveals another manifestation of this problem. In the middle of the semester, she asked her language arts students to identify one area in which they hoped to improve during the second half of the course. Instead of identifying a skill, such as writing organization or reading comprehension, most students listed either tests or homework. Rather than identifying gaps in student learning, this teacher's grading practices had focused students' attention on the assessment tools.

Getting to Grading That Works

Three years ago, I became an instructional coach at Heritage High School in Littleton, Colorado, where I had taught for 14 years. As a result of the training I received in this new position, I began to significantly revise my approach to grading, and I now guide other teachers in doing the same. Littleton Public School District has launched a districtwide initiative to address the issue of grading practices. After a year of research and study, including soliciting input from parents and teachers, the board of education has authorized a representative teacher pilot group to explore changing how we grade our students.

The problems my colleagues and I have experienced point to a crucial disconnect between learning and grades. If we expect our grades to promote learning, then we must be sure that our grades assess and report the learning that we believe is most essential. We as educators must become more conscious of our goals: the knowledge we want our students to understand; the skills we want them to refine; the kinds of reasoning we want them to demonstrate; and the connections we hope they will make between abstract concepts and life.

Once we have clarified what knowledge, skills, reasoning, and connections we believe are essential in our classrooms, we can choose components based on this essential learning on which we will base our grades. For example, in a language arts class, the overall grades might be separated into the components of reading comprehension, writing process, writing product, speaking, literary elements, and effort/citizenship. It is important that these grade components align with the state and district standards; some may be drawn primarily from content or skills already identified by such standards. A grade that is separated into distinct components on the basis of key learning becomes a meaningful communication—to students and parents alike—about what students have and have not mastered.

Once I began deliberately defining what I wanted students to learn, a healthier grading system fell into place. In my Introduction to Sociology class for juniors and seniors, I

grouped essential academic expectations into four components: conceptual understandings, application, analysis and evaluation, and formal writing.

To assess conceptual understanding, I monitored students' basic grasp of course content. For example, I expected students to be able to identify what sociologist Charles Cooley meant by *the looking glass self* and to explain the difference between a *functionalist* and a *conflict* view of society. The application component assessed students' ability to make personal connections between course concepts and life. The analysis and evaluation component assessed how well students could use sociological concepts to deepen and challenge their understanding of the larger society. The formal writing component assessed students' writing skills.

Nonacademic Factors

Although grades should definitely reflect the quality of students' academic performance, many teachers believe that students' work habits, responsibility, and attitudes—what researcher Robert Marzano (2000) calls nonacademic factors—are also important.

I believe it is essential to report academic and nonacademic factors separately. We can assess a student's ability to turn things in on time and report it as part of a nonacademic grade component. This assessment, however, should not distort feedback regarding that student's ability to understand a concept or write an essay. In the previously cited language arts example, nonacademic factors are recorded under the effort/citizenship grade component. In the grading scheme for my sociology class, I included a nonacademic component called work habits, which was worth 10 percent of the overall class grade. With a disaggregated grading system, I can simultaneously give accurate feedback on students' learning of essential concepts or skills and their performance on nonacademic factors.

In keeping track of students' work in my sociology course, I grouped each course assignment under one of the five components of essential learning, depending on what kind of learning the assignment tapped. For example, because students' journal entries and reflection worksheets prompted them to connect course concepts and life, scores for those assignments counted toward the application component. I counted some assignments under more than one component; a major paper, for instance, might receive an academic grade for ideas and content grouped under analysis and evaluation and a nonacademic grade for work habits, reflecting whether the student writer completed all steps of the process on time.

I based the letter grade for each component on the average score of all assignments grouped under that component. Each component was worth a specified percentage of the overall letter grade, and I computed the overall course grade by combining the grades for the five components according to the predetermined weight of each. I updated each student's scores continually on a student summary form that I maintained online. Each student and parent could see this individual form anytime, and I also printed this report in preparation for parent-teacher conferences.

Sticky Issues

Handling Homework

When assessing homework assignments, it's especially important to distinguish between academic achievement and nonacademic factors. When we base a significant portion of a student's grade on homework, then the aggregate grade may be a more accurate measure

of a student's effort than of his or her learning. In the past, students in my classes who completed homework often received good overall grades even when their actual understanding, as measured by tests, was unsatisfactory. Conversely, students who failed to turn in homework often received low or failing grades even when they had excellent understanding of the content. I do assess the quality of homework: A student who does poor work or shows a lack of understanding will get only partial credit. But my experience suggests that even the quality of the work on an assignment that goes home is more an indicator of nonacademic work habits than of academic understanding. And it is obvious that when an assignment is not turned in at all, we can draw no conclusions about the offending student's knowledge or skills.

To resolve this issue, I consider a student's diligence in doing daily homework as a nonacademic grade component and his or her in-class assessments as a measure of learning. When I combine these components into an overall grade, I weigh the work habits portion at 10–20 percent, which acknowledges the importance of nonacademic factors while placing a greater emphasis on academic learning.

Late Work

With regard to work turned in late, I make a distinction between late daily homework assignments and late major projects or papers. If daily homework is recorded only in the nonacademic portion of the grade, it seems acceptable to me that a teacher might not accept or credit late homework. A student who does not turn in all daily assignments but who has mastered the material can still receive a high grade in the academic component if he or she demonstrates strong learning through in-class assessments. Conversely, a student who turns in all of his or her homework but is not learning will receive high marks for the nonacademic portion, but not on academic components.

Major assignments like projects or papers, however, should be handled differently. Because they are important learning opportunities, they should be accepted even when they are late. The difficulty arises in determining how to assign a grade to late work. A common practice for teachers is to simply reduce the grade, but this practice confuses the issue. A lower grade for an essay turned in late does not accurately communicate how well the student has learned and performed. The grade may indicate that the student is a poorer writer than he or she actually is. With a disaggregated grade, however, the teacher can record a low work habits grade to reflect that the student missed the deadline while giving the paper a grade on the academic component that accurately reflects what the student has learned.

In my sociology class, I assigned students three formal papers. Students were required to successfully complete these assignments to pass the class. I assessed three separate components for each paper: an analysis and evaluation grade for content, a work habits grade for fulfilling the steps and turning the paper in on time, and a formal writing grade that reflected writing skills.

The first semester I tried this approach, it paid high dividends. As I collected our first formal writing assignment, in which students were to observe and document a social pattern, one student sheepishly admitted to not having completed the paper. I reminded him that although he would lose work habits points, he could still get full credit for the academic portions if he turned in a quality paper. He went back to work monitoring social patterns and turned the paper in the next week. In assessing it, I discovered that although his writing was mediocre, his ideas were inspired. This student received three grades for this assignment: an *F* for work habits, an *A* for analysis and evaluation, and a *C* for formal writing. I was able to report the lateness of the student's work without dampening his

enthusiasm or distorting the feedback the grade provided. Most important, the student took full advantage of this important learning opportunity: In fact, he went on to pursue sociology at the postsecondary level. Much would have been lost if I had simply told him to forget the assignment because I do not accept late work.

Extra Credit

If students are allowed to raise their grade through extra-credit work that is independent of essential learning, then that raised grade reinforces the view of grades as a commodity to be earned. When a student asks for an extra-credit assignment to raise his or her grade, I remind the student that the purpose of grades is to assess and promote learning. A low grade simply communicates a learning gap; the way to raise the grade is to learn more. I explain that although I do not believe in extra credit, I do believe in opportunities for further learning. A student who scored low on a formal paper, for example, may seek extra writing help, rewrite the paper, and try for a higher grade. If a student received a low quiz grade, he or she may take the quiz again to demonstrate mastery of the material. This approach helps reinforce the view that grades are a communication tool, not the goal.

Finding a Better Way to Motivate

If we want to keep the focus on learning, we must not depend on grades to motivate our students. In 1945, junior high school teacher Dorothy De Zouche stated, "If I can't give a child a better reason for studying than a grade on a report card, I ought to lock my desk and go home and stay there" (p. 341). Sixty years later, assessment expert Richard Stiggins (2005) declares that "we can succeed as teachers only if we help our students *want* to learn" (p. 199).

As they begin their schooling, young learners are quite inquisitive, eager to read their first chapter book and excited to discover their place in the world. But many students' innate curiosity is stifled by an education system that too often values compliance over creativity, taking tests over testing theories, memorizing over understanding, and high grades over learning.

If educators wish to convince students that we value their understanding, their reasoning, their ideas, and their creativity, we must practice what we preach. By creating meaningful grade components rooted in essential learning, separating out nonacademic factors to ensure that we assess true learning, and sharing our passion for what we teach, we can use grades as a communication tool rather than as the goal.

References

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