

Rethinking Grading: Trends and best practices

Greater Edmonton Teachers Conference

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❖ Rethinking grading

❖ What's wrong with what we're doing now?

- no consistency from teacher to teacher (grades or late policies)
- grade-learning mismatch
- grade grubbing
- consequences of failing grades (retention, GPA, college admission)
- demotivation
- taboo discussion (how much do you know about the grading patterns of others?)

Grades aren't the problem, it's the way we use them.

Words of wisdom from

Robert Lynn Canady, Professor Emeritus, University of Virginia

"There is little or no evidence that **REPEATED FAILURE** motivates students to become more responsible"

"We have operated on the assumption that if **STUDENTS HAD TO HAVE SUPPORT** (like extra time or redo's) that **THERE HAD TO BE A PENALTY** such as averaging their low grade with the new grade...this is based on the belief that 'fairness is equated with sameness'"

"We have built grading policies and practices primarily on the **THEORY** that '**FEAR OF FAILURE**' **WILL MOTIVATE** students.

"**TO GAIN ADDITIONAL LEARNING TIME**, historically students have **HAD TO FAIL FIRST.**"

(Dr. Canady has been researching grading for 25 years and is currently researching dropouts)

❖ Beliefs about teaching and grading

- What's important to "teach"—rules, deadlines, responsibility, **and** math.
- Teachers should instill values--hard work ("trying"), neatness, promptness, obedience, niceness.
- It's our moral duty (part of our job) to reward virtue and punish vice (see values above).
- Grades are the primary tool (or weapon) we have to compel those behaviors in both student and parents.
- Working is as important as learning.

"I have challenged my staff to grade student achievement, not student work"
[principal quote]

❖ Four realities and how to deal with them

- ✓ "If I don't grade it, they won't do it"
- ✓ "Work habits matter"
- ✓ "Deadlines matter"
- ✓ "Effort is important"

REALITY #1 <i>"If I don't grade it they won't do it "</i>
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Things to think about

- What we choose to grade drives student behavior ("Does this count?").
- We've let **them** be in charge (it's like extortion—"what will you give me?")
- Grades *do* control behavior, but not always in the way we would like!
 (ie: grade grubbing, cheating, focus on form not substance)

About 28% of Canadian teachers use homework to calculate student grades, compared to, almost 70% of U.S. teachers and 14% in Japan. (Baker and LeTendre, 2005)

More things to think about

- What if they are not addicted to grades--
but they are hungry for feedback about their learning and grades are the only feedback they can get?
- Does grading everything reward working more than learning?
- They won't do it because we allow them not to do it. This is learned behavior and can be unlearned. This is a teacher expectation issue.

Moving from grading to checking—focusing on feedback

Checking is diagnostic—teacher is an advocate

Grading is evaluative—teacher is a judge (Guskey)

Grades are not necessary for learning, but feedback is

The goals of feedback are

- To improve learning and to improve performance on summative assessments
- To promote student ownership of learning and self-assessment

Should all work be graded? No

Should all work receive feedback? Yes

Is the teacher the only one who can give feedback? No

Everything does not need a number!

How much time do we spend adding up points and recording numbers?

(Once you put a number on it, it can be compared to other students)

Formative feedback, summative grading

- Short trials to check for understanding, Practice comes later
- Intermittent feedback on long term projects
- More one-on-one feedback with students as others are working
- More paired work, help your neighbor, study buddies
- Grades are temporary--Students correct mistakes after feedback

Quality Feedback is:

- *Formative*---assessment for learning takes place during learning.
- *Corrective*---provides specific information to the student about how to reach the learning target.
- *Interactive*-- requires dialogue between teacher and student(written or verbal) or student and student
- *Not part of the grade*—"We don't keep score during practice"

Efficient ways of providing feedback

- *Quick visual check*—two piles: got it/didn't get it(no marks)
- Quick self-check—students write one of three symbols at top of homework indicating:

<i>got it/understood</i>	! /happy face/ green sticker
<i>sort of got it/not sure</i>	? / neutral face/yellow sticker
<i>didn't get it/totally lost</i>	#&/frowning face/red sticker
- *Students check keys, use rubrics*
- *Students meet in groups, compare answers, ask each other questions, report back*

Using written tests as formative assessments

- Shorter, more frequent tests
- Open-book or open-notebook tests
- Tests are the greatest learning opportunity
 - 24 hours before the test—study guides and reviews
 - test day—feedback during test
 - students make test corrections
 - review test corrections

Reasons for not including formative assessments in the grade

1. Students concentrate on learning from mistakes instead of suffering the disappointments of lowered grades.
2. Students endure less anxiety about "work" that "counts".
3. Students engage in less cheating or avoidance.
4. The stage is no longer set for other grading abuses like giving zeros or "docking" for late work.
5. Student-teacher relationships improve.
6. Students learn more and perform better on summative assessments.
7. Student's comparisons of teacher grading systems vanish.

--Hugh O'Donnell, 2007, school board member and retired middle school social studies teacher, Hillsboro, Oregon (in O'Connor, 2009, p. 129)

Student ownership of learning

Many students don't know how to self-assess because assessment has always been "done to" them. They need ungraded, non-threatening practice.

Ways to increase student ownership of learning

- Students set individual goals
- Students participate in peer evaluation
- Students keep portfolios of their work
- Student-led conferences
- Once a week locker clean out
- Grade check every week or every other week

REALITY #2 WORK HABITS and DEADLINES MATTER

Completing work to specifications is an important habit to develop—Such habits as following directions, format (like writing the question), grammar, spelling, neatness, meeting deadlines (Each teacher has their own list of what's important)

In school, deadlines are necessary for

- A. timely feedback to the teacher about student understanding
(for formative, time-sensitive tasks)
- B. efficiency for the teacher in the grading process
(for large summative projects)

? But--does it belong in the grade?

? If so, how big a part of the grade (we still want an accurate picture of *learning*)

Ways to deal with it

*Instead of trying to teach kids responsibility,
what if we force them to practice responsibility?*

- *If you feel you must "count late" in the grade, strive for the middle of the road--*
 - *too strict—kills incentive to complete work
 - *too lenient—gets turned in after it matters or crazy for the teacher

Laura Eberle, 9th grade science teacher--Homework Grading Policy

<i>Full stamp=10 pts</i>	Completed and turned in on time, full credit
<i>Half stamp=5 points</i>	Turned in on time, but incomplete (Complete it before the day of the test and you earn 7 pts)
<i>No stamp=0 points</i>	Was not turned in on time Complete it before the day of the test and you earn 5 pts

(This connects the purpose of the homework to the assessments)

- *Responsibility must be practiced and scaffolded—you have to make them do it*
 - Zeros Aren't Possible Programs (all work must be made up)
 - Early intervention for missing work
 - Intermittent deadlines on long term projects
 - Weekly packets instead of daily homework
- *Include "meeting deadlines" as part of the separate work habits grade or section of report card*
- *Have we investigated why the student has a persistent problem? Does work need to be differentiated?*

~"We are faced with the irony that a policy that may be grounded in the belief of holding students accountable(giving zeros) actually allows some student to escape accountability for learning"(O'Connor, 2007, p. 86)

REALITY #3 Effort is important

And it just feels right to reward it as part of the grade

Things to think about

"Gaming the system" with effort grades—

It's not even always *effort to learn*—sometimes it's *effort to please* the teacher or meet teacher needs (like points for bringing Kleenex or selling candy)

"But I worked so hard on this"—they want something for effort, but they still didn't show understanding of the content.

"Effort is often difficult to define and even more difficult to measure" (O'Connor, p. 96)

Do we really know how hard they are trying?

"In the real world" effort doesn't mean squat—it's performance

"In real life trying hard to do a good job is virtually never enough. If we don't deliver relevant, practical results, we will not be deemed successful, regardless of how hard we try." (Stiggins in O'Connor, page 97)

Ways to deal with it

- *Clearly define what constitutes effort—ie: staying on task during class, attempting to work the problems, taking advantage of extra learning opportunities*
- *Report work habits as a separate category on the report card*

Traditionally homework practices have mandated two things

*Work must be turned in by the deadline and
All homework must be completed*

1. *Work must be turned in by the deadline (even when given one day notice)*

When work is not turned in on time, there must be a penalty

(We must reward compliance, punish non compliance)

(ie: loss of points or loss of privileges--like missing lunch or recess)

Assumes that a negative consequence will change behavior in the future

Zeros or point penalties for late work

Assumes grades are the only weapon available to us to inflict a consequence

Reality: Time management, prioritizing, and planning are functions of the brain's frontal lobe, which is "under construction" for most young people until early adulthood.

"Can you please make my child grow up faster?" Mom says.

Reality: grades are not currency for many kids.

2. *All homework must be completed*

Assumes that our tasks are infallible—that all homework assignments have a positive impact on learning.

Assumes all students need to complete all homework assignments to achieve mastery.

Rewards working not necessarily learning.

Is the grade an accurate reflection of learning?

Is it about working or learning?

Traditional grading practices vs. Better grading practices

TRADITIONAL Discussions/complications	BETTER	
Sorting and ranking Norm referencing Grading on the bell curve	Teaching and learning Criterion-referenced Striving for a "whale" curve	(see list below)
Crunching numbers Averaging (the mean) Zeros Grades "calculated"	Body of evidence Median or mode Grades "determined" using professional judgments	One bad grade seals your fate. Why not just give 50's?
One shot grading—all grades permanent Moment-in-time assessments Do you know it today at 10:00?	Test for mastery/grade in pencil Use most recent information Retakes after remediation	"What's really hurting education is ink" Story: "I'll take advantage of the rewrite."
All assignments included in grade-- both formative and summative	Only summative assessments "count"	The most recent evidence of learning is the most accurate. "We don't keep score during practice"
Non-academic factors part of grade (effort, lateness)	Only achievement "counts" in the grade Standards based	(see "Moving toward standards based grading" below)

The way forward--Moving toward standards based grading

Standards-based grading is not just about changing grading—
it's a complete overhaul of the teaching-learning process.

- Grades are about demonstrated learning through various forms of summative assessments, retaken until an acceptable level of mastery is achieved.
- Students may receive an INCOMPLETE as a quarter or semester grade until mastery is achieved.
- In such a system, homework does not count in the grade—it is used to check for understanding, provide feedback to the learner and to practice for tests.
- Work habits/life skills are shown as a separate category on the report card— they may be evaluated but are not part of the grade.

In a nutshell:

Everybody works

We only grade learning

We don't keep score during practice

What standards-based grading looks like

***Tests are divided into sections by concept/standard—each section gets its own grade

***Gradebook is organized by concept/standard and test section grades are recorded by concept.

***Report cards are standard/concept based—report level of mastery by concept.

***Work habits are reported separately.

**Lombard School District 44 Student Progress Report
Lombard, Illinois**

2011-2012 Glenn Westlake Middle School

Academic ratings

A 90-100%
B 80-89%
C 70-79%
D 60-69%
F 50-59%

Performance ratings

O Often demonstrates skill
W Working on development of skill
N Needs improvement

Reading

Homework
 Participation
 Organization

Weber	B
	W
	W
	W

Wilmette Public Schools, Wilmette, Illinois USA

Grades 5-8

Process—successful habits that maximize learning such as work completion, preparedness, and participation. Each habit gets a ranking

3—consistently 2-sometimes 1-seldom

Product--knowledge and skills in standards assessed through final projects, tests, etc

Letter grades represent percentage range of understanding/mastery of material for that marking period

A—demonstrates understanding of skills and concepts at the 90% level or greater

B— demonstrates understanding of skills and concepts at the 80-89%

C— demonstrates understanding of skills and concepts at the 70-79%

D— demonstrates understanding of skills and concepts at the 60-69%

U— (unacceptable) demonstrates understanding of skills and concepts at the 59% or lower.

How grades are determined in Wilmette

- Teachers consider the *preponderance of student data*
—along with the *most recent evidence*.
- Teachers may assign *greater weight to certain pieces* of student work.
- Teachers may consider the child's *typical* performance during the marking period.
- Teachers may *disregard* practice work samples that *no longer accurately reflect* your child's achievement.

From Wilmette Public Schools parent brochure—

"We are moving away from simply averaging all of your child's assignments, tests, projects, etc. because this may not convey an accurate picture of what your child knows and is able to do at the conclusion of a marking period."

Making change happen

Triage--Emergency relief (quick and dirty)

- Limit the percentage homework may count in the grade
- Replace zeros with Incompletes or 50's(temporarily)
- Prohibit non-academic factors from counting in the grade

Baby steps to grading reform (slower and more complex)

- Implement *Zeros Aren't Possible* program
- Develop and standardize reasonable late policies
- Empower students with more self assessment
- Educate parents
- Standardize weighting of formative and summative assessments
- Prioritize mastery concepts/Develop common assessments
- Organize gradebooks by standards or concepts, not assignments
- Revise schedule to allow for reteaching and retesting

Typical ZAP(Zeros aren't possible)

Held Monday through Thursday for 1 to 2 hours
 Kick in when students are missing 3 assignments
 Both mandatory and voluntary
 Often provide snacks
 Transportation home usually provided

**Homework Assistance Program (HAP)* Monticello Middle School, Shawnee Kansas

Fifth period every day for homework completion. Teachers list homework on a webpage. HAP teachers keep a record of completed as well as missing assignments. Teacher use HAP time to reteach students who score less than 80% on common assessments.

**STAT* Prairie High School, Vancouver, Washington

30 minute period following lunch for academic help, library, or clubs. Based on 6-week progress reports, students must report to teachers twice weekly for classes they are failing. Teachers may also "Summon" students they feel are struggling. Students with no F's from the previous 6-week progress report go to clubs or have an extended lunch. Juniors and seniors with no F's may leave campus for lunch.

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About the presenter

Dr. Cathy Vatterott is an Associate Professor of Education at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, as well as a parent and a former teacher and principal. She is the author of three books—*Academic Success through Empowering Students* (National Middle School Association, 1999), *Becoming a Middle Level Teacher: Student-focused Teaching of Early Adolescents* (McGraw Hill, 2007), and *Rethinking Homework: Best Practices that Support Diverse Needs* (ASCD, 2009). She has presented her homework research to over 9000 educators and parents in the U.S., Canada, and Europe. She has been interviewed as a homework expert for radio and television, for articles appearing in such magazines as *Parents*, *Better Homes and Garden*, *Child*, and *Working Mother*, and for articles appearing in numerous U.S. newspapers and educational websites.