Teacher Blogs > Work in Progress

Want To Know What's Wrong With Averages?

By Starr Sackstein on January 3, 2016 6:37 AM

$$80+80+80+80+80= 400/5 = 80$$
$$70+50+80+100+100=400/5= 80$$
$$90+70+60+80+100=400/5= 80$$
You get the point
Different learning profiles +
Same outcome =
Not effective
👎

Although playing the averages is a safe way of getting to the middle, it isn't an effective way of showing student learning.

There are just too many varieties of combinations that end up equalling the same thing.

Can you see what the issue would be here?

Consult the image to the left. Three different students with a variety of "test scores". Each of the tests are attempting to show student learning of different content and skills. What the parent and student see on the report card is exactly the same despite the discrepancies in the profiles.

So the communication is misleading at best and confusing at worst.

If "grades" are supposed to inform about learning, it can be agreed that the above is not very useful.

Learners are constantly progressing and our method of communicating that process is often inadequate, especially the practice of averaging. When we grade students and lay those stagnant, moment to moment scores in a a grade book and then add them together and divide, we are losing precision data with every calculation.

Students need to be assessed regularly on a formative basis, provided with **specific feedback** and strategies to encourage growth. If possible, no scores should be assigned to quantify that learning as the grade itself is imprecise measure. Standards based grading gets closer to accurate as students can be provided levels of mastery based on specific standards, but this too is extremely subjective although less misleading.

As we continue to progress into the 21st century, we need to re-evaluate the way we **assess students** getting rid of any practice that doesn't serve their learning.

Although many systems may not be ready to give up grades completely, there are ways to make the assessing practices more aligned with actual student growth and then communicate it a more genuine and productive way.

Consider using a decaying average rather than a regular one that takes the most recent iteration of the learning of a standard and places more weight upon it. Is it really fair or accurate to average in a student's first attempt at learning something in with the last? Most people don't do anything perfectly the first time and using that data can skew what a learner knows from the jump.

Another challenge is the ever changing nature of progress. Report cards take a moment in time and share data that is no longer relevant by the time the student receives the document. Using online communication systems help to avoid this challenge. If teachers input data on a regular basis, the feedback is up to data and accurate. The learner knows how well he or she is doing and so does the parent. If these systems are in place, what is the need or purpose of a report card at the end of a semester? It seems a little antiquated in practice.

Students also need an opportunity to be a part of this process. One great way to help add their voice in is through **reflection and self-assessment**. Learners can be taught what to look for to evaluate their own growth based on goals they create. The teacher then works as a facilitator in that continued growth process providing specific strategies for what students are working on.

If we turn assessment into a conversation rather than a separate terminal events, we can create a profile of a learner that is more precise and meaningful to everyone involved. In *Hacking Assessment: 10 Tips for Going Gradeless in a Traditional Grades School*, I help teachers improve their assessment practices to improve learning wherever they are in the process.

One thing you can do tomorrow is give up averaging. This practice hurts students and doesn't satisfy the burden of genuine communication between parents and schools about student learning.

What will you do today to improve assessment practices in your classroom? School? Community? Please share

Categories: Feedback   Planning and organization   Professional Learning   student empowerment

Tags: #HackLearning   averages   grading   Hacking Assessment   SBGa   standards based grading

Categories: Feedback   Planning and organization   Professional Learning   student empowerment

Tags: #HackLearning   averages   grading   Hacking Assessment   SBGa   standards based grading