The Only "F" that Matters

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Making grading more about feedback—and less about the score.

> *Any work I assign through Google Classroom is an optional enrichment learning opportunity. Students will not receive grades that will count for their report card. However, I will offer feedback, sometimes as a score or as comments, to help each child progress in their understanding of the content or skill. —3rd grade teacher*

Last spring, as schools shuttered amid the coronavirus outbreak, teachers in my district were confined to "assigning" work that could not be required and could not be graded or counted. Under such circumstances, it would not have been unusual for students to choose not to complete these assignments, or for teachers to assign "busy work," if anything at all. But in my school, the overwhelming majority of students *did* complete work that was assigned. For me, the idea that a teacher might assign meaningful, optional work, *and* provide feedback (like our 3rd grade teacher quoted at left)—not required by the district or school—speaks to the very heart of how we as educators should approach our grading practices. That is, with an emphasis on feedback aimed at improving student understanding rather than categorizing it.

Of course, assigning letter or numeric grades continues to be a common practice in education. Students receive test and project grades, which are then averaged and recorded on a report card that eventually becomes part of their school record. Often these grades are just that: letters or numbers placed at the top of an assignment as an indication of the degree of correctness a student has reached. Feedback, if present at all, often gets missed as students and parents focus on the "grade." The problem is that the official grade means little if students (and parents) do not know where they fall on the learning continuum. Indeed, neither an *A*nor *F* grade really lets students know the next steps in the process and, in many instances, implies that learning is static or *product-based* rather than *process-based* (Guskey & Bailey, 2010).

Process Over Product

In general, product-based grading practices focus on what students know and are able to do at a particular point in time *without* attention to progress that may have been made or factors that might impact student outcomes. Teachers who use product-based criteria for grading tend to have fewer graded activities and calculate individual student averages based on scores from a student's (usually first) attempt on tests, classroom assignments, reports, projects, or presentations. When educators prioritize product-based criteria for grading, it suggests a fundamental belief that the primary purpose of awarding grades is to provide (and communicate) an evaluation of a student's achievement and performance (O'Connor, 2002), rather than the progress that student may have made over the course of the term.

By contrast, teachers who use process-based criteria for grading purposes focus on how students get to a particular point. Summative grades are still included but typically carry less weight, and student report card averages are calculated using "grades" for a greater number of assignments, including the smaller tasks leading up to a summative task.

In addition, because this type of approach includes opportunities for resubmissions or retakes, as well as attention to the *steps* toward "mastery," process-based grading tends to offer a more complete picture of student progress, regardless of the "score" on a final product. This is especially true if early assignments, when students are just learning the content, only include narrative feedback from the teacher—or if the grades on them are weighted less heavily in report card averages.

One of the advantages of process-based grading is that students receive feedback at multiple checkpoints. The effectiveness of this feedback depends on whether it is aligned to short-term targets or goals that ultimately measure

progress *toward* (not of) proficiency or mastery (Marzano & Heflebower, 2011). Thus, students (and teachers) have numerous opportunities to "get it right"—which is key to equitable grading.

From Theory to Practice

It was early in my career as a literacy instructor in a large urban, predominantly Title 1 school district, that I first realized the inequities of product-based grading practices. Some of my students, often English learners or those designated as special education, were able to demonstrate conceptual understanding over the course of a lesson through prework or discussion but struggled to fully demonstrate their learning on summative tasks. And, since these tasks were weighted more heavily, their grades suffered. When I shifted my own thinking, however, and placed more emphasis on the *process*, on the steps, to learning, all of my students were able to see small (graded) successes and so get higher overall report card grades.

Over the years, as I've transitioned from being a classroom teacher to district instructional coach to school administrator, I've had the opportunity to both implement and observe many classroom grading practices. In that capacity, I have seen and tried it all: the great and the not so great. The following outlines what I see as the most common pitfalls to grading student work—and suggestions for improvement based on process-based, equitable best practices.

Grading Pitfalls and Improvements

Homework

The problem: While homework can both be an essential part of the learning process and help solidify the home-school partnership, assigning grades to homework without consideration of a variety of factors can be inequitable. This is especially so if students are awarded "zero" grades for noncompletion of, or incorrect answers on, homework. Teachers need to ask themselves the reason behind noncompletion or incorrect answers. Was the student ready for practice or was he still struggling to grasp the concept? Did she have a "space" or the "time" to do homework at home? Is there a language barrier or a cultural reason for why the work was not completed? (Some Hispanic cultures, for example, believe in a firm home-school divide where schoolwork is for school, not home.) Did the homework require supplies or technology that the student did not have access to?

Conversely, while some students have no help or resources at home, others have *too much* help. Although parent support and feedback on homework can reinforce learning, if parents are directly contributing to or correcting a homework assignment before it's turned in, assigning grades for work that is ultimately not the student's own defeats the purpose.

Try this: Make homework assignments optional and offer comments rather than grades. While some teachers believe students won't complete assignments that are not graded, the experience in my district during the school shutdowns has shown us that this is not the case. Students *will* complete assignments if they understand that the purpose is to help them progress in their learning and that it's OK to make mistakes. Not only does this practice prevent teachers from penalizing students for factors outside of their control (that might prevent completion, for example), it offers teachers the chance to give students feedback without focusing on a grade.

Alternatively, teachers can encourage students to read a book of their choice (ideally within their Lexile range) for 20–30 minutes every night, and provide feedback through discussions about the book or journaling. Research shows a concrete link between reading practice, reading growth, and overall student achievement (Renaissance Learning, 2016).

Participation

The problem: Participation grades can help "fill in the gaps" on a report card. Yet the act of grading students' participation is often subjective and vulnerable to teachers' implicit biases (Feldman, 2018). What it means to "participate" is usually defined by the teacher's own background, and "participation" can become conflated with behavior. Moreover, often students do not know *how* participation grades are calculated, which means that they are not being given a fair chance to meet a target.

Try instead: If schools account for the variety of ways that individual students are able to "show" what they have been learning, participation-based grading loses its subjectivity. For example, teachers could create a participation rubric that relies on a "yes/no" designation, rather than assigning points to degrees of participation. This might include observable actions like answering questions, asking questions (when prompted and without prompting), or tracking the speaker.

The key here is that students should not have to earn a check in every box to receive full credit, and teachers should come back to each student's rubric multiple times over the course of the term. By including students in this revisiting process, teachers can provide students with valuable feedback about their participation. Student behavior, attendance, dress code infractions, or preparedness (having supplies, having homework completed, etc.) should never be used to determine a student's participation (or any other) grade.

Exit Tickets

The problem: In order to give students timely and relevant feedback, teachers must first get feedback on how a particular lesson is going. Exit tickets remain an essential strategy for formatively assessing students. Collected at the end of an instructional block, exit tickets aim to assess student progression toward mastery. Yet I typically observe three main exit ticket issues: when the question on the exit ticket does not match the learning objective for the day and/or the lesson instruction from the day; when exit tickets ask vague questions (what did you learn today?) or repeat questions from an earlier activity (so students already know the answer); and when exit tickets are graded. Each of these "issues" completely defeats the purpose of an exit ticket, which is to determine which students made progress toward the learning so that the *teacher* can provide feedback and determine the next instructional steps.

Try instead: First, ensure that the question on the exit ticket matches the instruction for the day *and* is aligned with the language of the standard being taught. After collecting exit tickets and reviewing student answers, teachers can make three piles: "got it," "almost got it," and "didn't get it." The number of student "tickets" in each pile can help teachers determine the next steps. If the majority of students got it, the teacher can "pull" those that didn't either before (during intervention, for example) or during the next lesson, provide feedback, and clear up misunderstandings. If the majority of students did not get it, the teacher may need to reteach (if the skill is needed for the next lesson) or reinforce (if the skill is spiraled into, or scaffolded from) that skill during the next lesson. After that, teachers can throw the tickets away!

Outsized Grading for Short Assignments

The problem: Traditionally, teachers assign 100 points to every assignment. I understand why: It makes the math for grading easy, especially since most school districts assign final report card grades based on a 100-point numeric scale. Here is the issue: If a student has three problems on a math test, and each problem has multiple steps for the students to progress through, one small misstep can spell disaster. If the student gets one question wrong, and the teacher computes the score as 2/3, the highest grade that student can earn is a 66. It doesn't matter that he solved the other questions correctly, which means (assuming that all questions assess the same learning goal) that he knows *how* to do it, by regular standards he has failed. Therefore, this approach does not really assess a student's level of understanding, just his level of correctness.

Try instead: Rubric-based grading helps teachers consider student learning on a more holistic and individualized basis. Great Minds (which publishes *Eureka Math*, the math curriculum my district uses) offers excellent examples of how students can get credit for incorrect answers if they are able to show progression of understanding and/or progress toward mastery. Student answers to each question are considered against a scale of understanding, levels 1–4. Teachers place attention on *how* students solve the problem, which means that they can receive points even if their final

answer is incorrect. In addition, the teacher has the autonomy to determine the grade associated with each level of understanding, which might vary depending on where the class is in terms of instruction.

For example, students might receive full credit with understanding at levels 1 or 2 in the introductory stages of a lesson, but need to be at levels 3 or 4 to receive full credit at the later stages of a lesson. Plus, because this type of rubric focuses on levels of understanding, teachers can easily identify where students are and provide relevant feedback.

Grade Deductions

The problem: All too often, points are deducted from student assignments for arbitrary reasons. If an assignment intending to assess the main idea has points deducted from it because a student forgets to put their name on it, or incorrectly uses subject-verb agreement, even if they met the goals of the assignment, something is wrong. I get it: I remember being a young teacher with high expectations (write in blue or black, only write on one side of the paper, I will not grade papers with no name, etc.) but at some point, I had to learn to pick my battles. If a student understood the concept, and was making progress toward an understanding of the concept being taught, who cares if she wrote in highlighter or had a few unrelated oversights!

Try instead: Rather than deducting points for nonacademic things, hand the student the work back and ask them to write their name, or add the period at the end of the last sentence, or rewrite it in the correct color ink, or whatever it is that you expect. Similarly, a student should not lose points for missteps unrelated to the concept being directly assessed.

That is not to say that those missteps should not be corrected, even if not directly related to the daily learning objective (understanding subject-verb agreement, for example, is important), just that rather than losing points, students should be given the opportunity to receive feedback, correct their mistakes, and resubmit. By giving students the chance to resubmit their work for a better grade, the focus of school inherently shifts from being about grades to being about learning.

Feedback First

It seems to me that, in the crisis-response climate we are in today, grading should be less about the score and more about the feedback. In providing students with quality, narrative-based feedback, teachers are able to propel students along the learning continuum, which remains the ultimate goal of K–12 education. Attention to process-based criteria, including those rooted in standard-based approaches to grading, that consider how students are progressing helps ensure that grading practices consider each child individually, holistically, and equitably.

References

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