Can Assessments Motivate?

Richard L. Curwin

How can teachers transform evaluation from a motivation killer to a motivation maker?

A child is attempting to ride a bicycle, and the bike falls over. Another child, learning to walk, loses her balance and lands on her bottom. A baby's green peas slide off his spoon as he moves it toward his mouth.

How do their parents respond? Good parents don't say, "You fail; you're not able to meet bicycling standards," "I'll develop a rubric for walking without falling," or "We need a Common Core curriculum to help you keep your food in your spoon." When children have trouble eating with a spoon, tying a shoe, riding a bicycle, dressing themselves, or any of a host of skills, their parents or guardians simply say, "Try again."

Many educators believe that success breeds success—that achievement leads to motivation (Wiliam, 2011). However, that's backward. Motivation or effort leads to success, not the other way around. Cheating, luck, and easy work can all lead to success, but they do not increase motivation (Weiner, 1986).

Consider the example of making tasks easy enough for students to be successful. However well-intended this strategy is, it is based on false logic. If a challenge is too easy, there's no pride in completing it. No parent feels pride in beating a 3-year-old in a game of Candy Land. And students feel no pride in doing something that's too easy.

I define educational motivation as *the desire to learn*, and I believe the evaluation process is one of the most formidable killers of motivation in education. Rewards, punishment, incentives, threats, or any external strategy might get students to do their work, but they rarely influence whether children *want* to learn. These externals create finishers, not learners. Thus, the question remains: How can assessments increase motivation for learning?

The answer is hidden in plain sight. It's in those two magical words *try again.* Assessments should encourage students to keep trying, whatever their level of achievement.

The Motivation Downward Spiral

The emphasis on high-stakes testing and grading begins early in the United States, sometimes as early as 1st grade. When 1st and 2nd graders receive the results of their early evaluations, most learn, by definition, that they are average. Many resign themselves to the box they have been placed in. Some continue to try their hardest and still are defined as average—or worse. These students may gradually give up hope. How long does it take before they become finishers rather than learners— if they bother to finish their work at all?

It's ironic that a tool as arbitrary as grades can have such a large impact. The difference between a 79 and an 81 is tiny, yet a student is likely to feel much more discouraged by receiving a *C* than a *B*. Further, the common practice of assigning course

grades by averaging all grades during the semester takes control out of the students's hands. When I was a college freshman, I scored poorly on my first three math tests, but then I started to work, scored in the 90s on every test from that point on, and earned the highest grade in the class on the final. My final grade for the course, determined by adding my scores throughout the semester, was a *B*. Mathematically, that score was accurate, but was it an accurate assessment of my learning?

Test scores reflect the values of the tester as much as the achievement of the student. If two students get an answer wrong on an "objective" standardized math test, one may not know how to do the work and the other could have made a careless mistake, but both get the same score. On teacher-made tests, scores can vary widely depending on the teachers' values. How important is the process as opposed to the correct answer when a student solves a math problem? How much does a teacher consider spelling and punctuation when grading a student essay? Harris, Smith, and Harris (2011) note that "while we may want to remove the human element, which can be unreliable, from the process of judging our children's achievement, that's not the way things work with our schools, and the children and adults who inhabit them. And it never can be" (p. 52).

Students cannot predetermine what score they will receive on any given task. However, they can control how hard they try. Much of the content knowledge assessed on tests becomes obsolete in a relatively short time. How many of us really need to know the seven products of Argentina? Desiring and making the effort to learn are far more crucial to later life than any specific information students may acquire. Honoring effort and giving effort and achievement equal weight can transform motivation in students.

Effort-Based Evaluation

It might sound radical to include effort as part of the grading process, but we can increase emphasis on effort without lowering our standards.

One option frequently tried is to list two grades, one for achievement and the other for effort. But this is unwise. What message does a student get if he scores low on effort and high on achievement? "I can succeed without trying, so why try?" Alternatively, what does a student think if she receives a high motivation score and a low achievement score? "Even when I try, I fail, so why should I try?" A better solution is to measure and count effort along with achievement to determine the final score.

Many educators use irrelevant information when they try to measure effort (Curwin, 2010). Marzano (2000) states that many teachers consider "the extent to which students complete classroom tasks in a timely and appropriate fashion" (p. 28). This includes procedural activities like handing in papers on time. But handing in papers in a timely fashion may have little to do with effort. My son, when in high school, once chose to be late with a project and accept the lower grade because he wasn't satisfied with the project and wanted to keep working on it until he improved it. Meeting timelines does not always indicate effort.

Fortunately, there are legitimate methods of evaluating effort. Teachers should explain these methods and let students know at the beginning of each grading period that they will

- *Count improvement.* No one can improve without trying. More improvement can translate into more points. Higher scores near the end of the learning process deserve more weight than at the beginning because they show the student is progressing.
- *Count seeking help.* A student who asks for help is exhibiting effort.
- *Count offers to help other students.* Helping others shows effort, and teaching others is the best way to learn.
- *Count extra work.* Asking to do extra work shows initiative.

Seven Ways to Encourage Effort

Because scores, even scores related to effort, are external motivators, we need to adopt assessment practices that encourage effort without relying on a score. Here are seven ways to modify your evaluation strategies to encourage students to try harder and increase internal motivation.

1. Never fail a student who tries, and never give the highest grades to one who doesn't. If students can succeed without trying, then the work is not challenging enough. These students need a higher level of challenge, and they should seek it out themselves if their teachers fail to provide it. Although determining the level of challenge is the teacher's responsibility, students need to be taught that getting by without effort is not acceptable. Taking the initiative to elevate their challenge needs to be expected of the best students.

On the other side, how can any student who tries be a failure? What more can we expect a student to do? Once again, it is the teacher's responsibility to provide the appropriate level of challenge. No student should fail just because the teacher is unable to provide a reasonable level of challenge.

2. Start with the positive. When going over an assignment, start with what the student did well. "Marty, you got numbers 3, 5,

6, and 8 right. That tells me you can do this work. Let's figure out why you missed the rest and how you can get them right."

3. See mistakes as learning opportunities, not failures. In every life situation, from building relationships to playing computer games, except school, mistakes are important in the learning process. We learn from them. In school, mistakes should never be seen as failures, but as diagnostic tools that tell students what they still need to learn.

4. Give do overs. Let students who want to increase their scores learn from their mistakes and try again. This expression of initiative clearly shows effort.

5. Give students the test before you start a unit. This way, they can see what they need to learn, what the teacher's priorities are, and how to organize their learning.

6. Limit your corrections. More than two corrections a page overwhelm most students. They may look at the test or paper and throw it away. Teachers do not need to correct every problem, just the most important ones.

Tell your students you'll give them a chance to fix those two most important mistakes, which you've marked, before moving on to two more. If students want you to point out other problems, you can do so in a one-on-one conversation.

7. Do not compare students. Students should never be measured by the achievement of others. Parents may want to know how their child compares with others, but a standards-based reporting system reports progress in relation to identified standards, not in relation to other children (Carr & Harris, 2001). For any standards-based assessment to be effective, I believe it must include effort as one of the major standards.

Imagine a school where every child does his or her best, and none give up hope of learning. Isn't that where you want to work? These strategies will help you get a little closer to making your school into that dream school.

References

Carr, J., & Harris, D. (2001). *Succeeding with standards*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Curwin, R. (2010). *Meeting students where they live: Motivation in urban schools*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Harris, P., Smith, B., & Harris, J. (2011) *The myths of standardized tests*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Marzano, R. (2000). *Transforming classroom grading*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Weiner, B. (1986). *An attributional theory of motivation and emotion*. New York: Springer-Verlag.

Wiliam, D. (2011). *Embedded formative assessment*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

Richard Curwin is the director of the master's program in behavior disorders at David Yellin Academic College of Education in Jerusalem. He is the author of about 20 books, including *Affirmative Classroom Management* (ASCD, 2013) and Meeting Students Where They Live: Motivation in Urban Schools (ASCD, 2010).

KEYWORDS

Click on keywords to see similar products:
student achievement, student assessment, student motivation

Requesting Permission

- For **photocopy**, **electronic and online access**, and **republication requests**, go to the Copyright Clearance Center. Enter the periodical title within the "**Get Permission**" search field.
- To **translate** this article, contact permissions@ascd.org