

Grading What Matters

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No matter how lofty our espoused education goals, our grading practices reveal what we truly value.

When I began analyzing my grading practices several years ago, I was embarrassed by what I found. Although I claimed I wanted my students to think more critically and engage with the world more fully, my grading practices communicated a different message. Students received so much credit for completing work, meeting deadlines, and following through with responsibilities that these factors could lift a student's semester grade to a *B* or an *A*, even as other indicators suggested that the student had learned little. My grading practices communicated clearly that, despite my claims to the contrary, students' willingness and ability to comply mattered most.

I've observed that other teachers approach grading similarly. Recently I heard from a parent who, after home-schooling for several years, had enrolled her son in a public school. After just three weeks, her son was failing his language arts class because he had failed to bring a book to read for the daily sustained silent reading time and to return a parent-signed course expectations sheet. The message? Compliance is the priority, and grades have little to do with learning.

An incident in my high school economics class confirms that students have internalized this message. A young man assigned to write an essay on health care turned in a neatly typed, but completely incoherent paper. The introduction supported universal health care, but the conclusion argued against it. I told this student that the paper must be redone. He was incredulous. He pleaded his case fervently, emphasizing that the paper was typed, edited, and completed on time. I explained that although punctuality, neatness, and grammar are important, it was his understanding that mattered most. Apparently 12 years of education had taught him otherwise.

Parent concerns are added proof that our unintended message has been delivered. Time after time, parent inquiry into student performance focuses on missing assignments. Parents want to know what missing work their child can turn in for credit, recognizing, quite accurately, that grades are primarily a reflection of effort rather than progress toward learning goals.

What Do We Measure?

As I reflected on this topic, I resolved to refocus myself and my students on learning. This, of course, required that I know what exactly I meant by student learning. Once more I took a look at my practice, and what I discovered was disturbing. I was not unlike the teacher I spoke with recently who hesitated to test her students after a three-day weekend because she feared they would perform poorly. If we avoid assessing our students after a long weekend, then obviously we are not expecting, nor attempting to assess, enduring understanding in students. Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (2005) agree that grades tend to measure students' short-term recall of information, rather than long-term, meaningful understanding.

If we focus predominately on measuring students' compliance and their ability to recall facts, our practices will interfere with our most significant purposes as educators. If we are to shift our focus to higher-level thinking, we must shift our grading practices.

Fixing the Fixation on Compliance

One key to making grades more meaningful is carefully distinguishing academic achievement from what Robert Marzano (2000) labels nonacademic factors. This strategy remains the important first step as we work to develop grading practices that support higher-level thinking (Winger, 2005).

As an instructional coach, I work with teachers to shift the focus of their grades from compliance to learning. Some teachers point out that nonacademic factors, such as the ability to meet deadlines, are crucial to success in school and in life. I agree that teachers should emphasize, and maybe even measure, student responsibility. The issue is one of focus and priorities. Nonacademic factors must be measured independently from learning and should never be allowed to dominate the overall grade.

To keep the focus on learning, we must carefully reconsider what we are measuring. For example, a student's performance on small daily assignments, usually assigned for practice or as preparation for the next class, is often more indicative of responsibility than of whether he or she grasps an important concept. Therefore, I record most of these daily assignments in a section of my grade book reserved exclusively for nonacademic factors.

If an assignment done at home will be used to measure students' academic achievement, I often give that piece of work a nonacademic as well as an academic grade. This allows me, for example, to lower the nonacademic grade if the work is turned in late while providing accurate feedback and full credit for the learning.

It is important to teach and expect responsibility. But it is also crucial that we value and accurately measure academic achievement. This system of separating academic and nonacademic factors in my grade book enables me to do both.

Assessing Our Expectations

Once we have distinguished non-academic factors from learning, we must carefully define the learning we are targeting and ensure that the academic portion of the grade deliberately assesses student progress toward it.

The movement toward standards-based grading aims to make grades more meaningful by connecting them to curricular standards. As we began rethinking grading in our district, our teachers employed this approach. Kendy Blake, a 6th grade science teacher, set up her grades around the topics of earth science, life science, and physical science. She also assessed writing as a separate skill category and separated nonacademic factors into a category dealing with work habits. Mike Mahoney used district standards to set up grades in his algebra class around the topics of polynomials, quadratics, probability, exponents, and systems of equations. He also had a nonacademic component that he labeled personal responsibility.

We discovered, however, that although this approach communicated more specific information about student learning, it did not address our tendency to assess students' recall of information rather than higher-level thinking.

Mike Mahoney's experience illustrated how this standards-based approach fell short. His math assessments typically included 15–20 questions that involved using algorithms to arrive at correct answers. Then the assessment added one or two story problems that required students to apply the mathematical concept to a new situation. Mr. Mahoney expected only his A students (perhaps 10 percent of his students) to solve the story problems that demonstrated higher-level understanding. He realized that he was not expecting a majority of his students to understand mathematics in a way that makes learning relevant and enduring.

Reorganizing Our Approach

After a year of meeting regularly to rethink grading practices, our teachers developed an alternative approach. We adopted the language used by several education experts, identifying *knowledge* as that which students can simply recall and using the term *understanding* to denote higher-order thinking skills. Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (2005)

emphasize that understanding must be our goal for our students because understanding moves learning from short-term to long-term memory and makes the learning meaningful and useful.

Just as we must distinguish learning from compliance, we must distinguish understanding from memorizing. If higher-order thinking matters most, then that is what our grades must assess, record, report, and reward. To make our grades match our priorities, the teachers in our district began to separate skills, knowledge, understanding, and non-academic factors in their grade books. These categories match Wiggins and McTighe's thinking and are consistent with the work of Richard Stiggins (2005), who identifies four types of learning targets: skills, knowledge, reasoning, and the ability to create products.

Restructuring her grades around these principles, science teacher Kendy Blake identified the following categories and their relative weight:

- *Content Knowledge*: The ability to grasp the basic concepts in physical science, earth science, and life science. Assessed through selected-response tests and quizzes and portions of homework and labs. (30%)
- *Enduring Understanding*: The ability to apply concepts to authentic situations. Evaluated through lab activities and constructed-response portions of tests and quizzes. (25%)
- *Science Skills*: The ability to employ inquiry, use the scientific method, and read charts and graphs. Assessed through lab activities. (25%)
- *Writing Skills*: The ability to use proper conventions, organization, and style to communicate scientific understanding in projects, lab activities, and essays. (10%)
- *Learning Support Factors*: The ability to follow directions, to be punctual, and to be prepared for class. (10%)

Mike Mahoney restructured his approach to grading his algebra students in a similar way:

- *Understanding*: The ability to fluently and flexibly apply algebra concepts. Assessed through story problems, explanations of solutions to problems, and identification and explanation of errors. (50%)
- *Computation Skill*: The ability to accurately use formulas, equations, and operations to compute the correct answer. (40%)
- *Personal Responsibility*: Behavior, effort, and attentiveness in class. Students self-assess in this area but must be able to defend their assessment. (10%)

With this system, these two teachers will assess students' work habits, knowledge, and skills. But more important, Ms. Blake and Mr. Mahoney will send a clear message that all students are expected to develop the higher-level thinking that is necessary for enduring understanding.

Reconnecting School and Life

Last May, I ran across a high school graduation card that hit too close to home. The front boldly stated "Graduate, you'll be amazed at how much of what you have learned in school will be handy in the real world." Inside, the card said, "Almost none."

Far too often, there is a disconnect between school and life as students have busied themselves jumping through the hoops of compliance and recall. Of course, students must discover the rewards of self-discipline and responsibility. But in the service of what ends? Do we not have grander goals? Do we not want our students to become thoughtful citizens of the world, to discover and strengthen their voices, to think more clearly, to speak and write more powerfully?

If we are to have any chance of accomplishing these grander goals, we must reconnect school and life by asking students to apply what they learn to real-world situations. We must ask them not only to be responsible and to remember, but also to understand— because it is understanding that makes learning meaningful, relevant, and enduring. A standards-based approach does not go far enough. We must assess for understanding.

References

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