

Four Grading Practices That Discourage Growth Mindset

Brad Weinstein

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BRAD WEINSTEIN
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A very popular buzz phrase on the education scene for a while now is growth mindset. We reference it repeatedly. We tweet about it and try to instill the value of failing in the learning process to students. Unfortunately, many of us are talking the talk, but not walking the walk when it comes to growth mindset in the learning process—especially in grading practices.



Grades, whether we like them or not, are one of the biggest factors in college acceptance. Failing grades are one of the biggest risk factors in students dropping out. Wouldn't it make sense to ensure that students can demonstrate growth and learn from mistakes in our classes? Many traditional grading practices reward students for being good at school—either in behavior or natural ability. In fact, many students see grades as an accumulation of points they need to obtain instead of a demonstration of mastery. This isn't healthy, and it starts in the classroom. Here are four grading practices that can kill growth mindset.

1. **Taking off points for late work, or not accepting late work at all.** Taking off points for late work is punitive and inaccurately reflects achievement. Did the student know 80 percent of the material, yet get a 50 percent on the assignment? If so, the student's grade is a reflection of behavior rather than achievement. Worse yet is not taking late work at all, which demoralizes students because they have no chance to recover from a mistake. Mathematically, zeros are almost impossible to overcome.
2. **Not allowing retakes on assignments or assessments.** If students are supposed to learn from mistakes, wouldn't it make sense to give them a redo? Does it make sense that students can retake entire courses, yet not an assessment in our classrooms? We must decide if it is more important for students to know material on a certain day, or for them to keep going until they get it. What are we saying if students got a failing grade on something,

yet they have no chance to fix it? If students fail an assignment, it is likely that they will fail that same concept on the quiz, test, and final. It is a snowball effect that could be prevented early on.

3. **Allowing retakes, but averaging the attempts.** Most major tests, including the ACT, SAT, Drivers' License Test, Pilots' License Test, and the Bar Exam allow the people taking them to do so as many times as they want—keeping the highest scores. By averaging a first attempt in a class at school, we are reporting on both what the student used to and currently knows, instead of just current mastery. Try having students reflect on the experience to help them develop their mindset further.
4. **Grading homework/classwork for accuracy on a first attempt.** Most students have a hard time when they do something the very first time. What if we were only allowed to ride a bike once and got assessed on it? Free your students to try new concepts in a low-pressure setting. Moving to graded assessment right away makes students anxious—either they give up right away when they can't work through problems without direct teacher help, or cheat. Many students must be exposed to concepts several times before mastering them. Try to avoid grading initial work or make it worth very little of the overall term grade.

Our students love video games because they can fail over and over again without consequences. They get an immense sense of joy and accomplishment when they try numerous times and finally beat the harder levels. Growth mindset in the classroom cannot exist unless we give students numerous opportunities to demonstrate success. If students know that they always can better themselves and have a chance in our classes, their attitude toward grades will be a lot more positive.