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Effective Grading Practices

Big Changes in a Small School

Abbi Roehrborn, Rhonda Opelt and Chad Hanson

Three teachers in a small rural school revamp their grading system and learn from the process.

Year after frustrating year, we checked endless papers, provided feedback to students only to have it ignored, and assigned grades that did not accurately reflect what students knew and were able to do. We knew something had to change but were not quite sure what it was. Then we attended a workshop led by Rick Wormeli, which inspired us to spend a summer reading, researching, and just plain thinking about our goals in the classroom. The three of us began the 2009–10 school year with a new plan.

Using ideas from Wormeli (2006) and Marzano (2006) as our starting point, we devised a new system of assessment that we believed would work well at our small rural school of 170 students in grades 7–12. As the year went on, we continued to tweak the plan until we had a system in place that has raised our students' learning and success in each of our subject areas (science, math, and social studies).

Making Meaning of Letter Grades

We started by redefining each letter grade in our grading system. Up to this point, the letter grade simply represented a percentage of points earned out of some arbitrary total, but it's much more meaningful to define grades as particular levels of mastery. Now, a C represents mastery of basic vocabulary and essential skills associated with a particular topic. Students earn a B if they not only have mastered basic concepts but also can go beyond basic recall to apply these concepts, often by solving problems and evaluating situations presented in class. Student work receives an A if it shows an ability to apply concepts to topics not covered in class as well as other content areas.

On the other end of the spectrum, students earn a D when they cannot show a basic level of mastery, but evidence of some knowledge is apparent. A student who can demonstrate basic knowledge with assistance might also earn a D. Students only receive an F if they do not provide any evidence of mastery or understanding.

We initially anticipated much student resistance to this idea because we believed number grades and percentages were important to them. In fact, one reason for redefining our grades in this way was to stop students from arguing for "just one more point" whenever they got back an assignment with points taken off for errors. Eliminating points shifted the focus to where it should have been the whole time—to the level of mastery achieved. To our surprise, we did not encounter much resistance from students. Once they understood the definitions for each grade, they readily accepted our assignment of letter grades rather than numbers.

Determining Grades

Redefining letter grades for our subject areas naturally led to a discussion of how to accurately assess a student's level of mastery. We devised and implemented a system of tiered assessments in which tests were separated into three different levels of questions. The Level 1 portion of the test addresses the vocabulary and concepts that we define as C-level work. Students who pass this portion of an assessment have mastered the basic essential skills and can take the Level 2 part of the assessment.

Level 2 focuses on B-level work and may include short-answer or essay questions, problem-solving questions, and analysis and evaluation questions. Passing this level earns the student a B and the opportunity to take the Level 3 exam. This portion of the exam contains questions that assess a student's ability to apply concepts learned in class to new situations and incorporates synthesis and evaluation questions. Answering these questions correctly earns a student an A.



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Students take both the Level 1 and 2 portions of the exam at the same time. We grade the Level 1 portion of the exam for all students and the Level 2 portion for students who passed Level 1; we also look over the answers to Level 2 questions for students who did not pass Level 1, but it's unusual for students who failed Level 1 to get many questions correct on Level 2. Students who passed Level 2 and can move on to Level 3 take that part of the exam on the following day during the first half of the class period.

Our biggest concern with implementing this portion of our plan was finding time to rewrite assessments. As teachers in a small school, we each have multiple preps, and rewriting all the assessments for each prep didn't seem possible. In general, we rewrote some of our assessments to fit this format and just tweaked others as needed. For example, many textbook tests contain questions from each level, so we simply reorganized these tests.

We constantly adjust our assessments to accommodate the students in our classrooms, but now they are always structured according to the three levels. We met with some resistance from students in the beginning, but once they understood how the tests were structured and the reasoning behind the changes, they embraced the new method of assessment.

Redos and Reviews

The overhauling of our assessment format led us to implement a "redo" system. We began by allowing students to redo any assessment for any reason as Marzano (2006) and Wormeli (2006) suggest. However, students were quick to abuse the privilege by failing to prepare for assessments properly because they intended to just "redo" them when they were ready. This made our workload overwhelming, so we began allowing students to redo assessments only when they turned in all assigned work, showed us that they were using graphic organizers and other study strategies, and completed a study plan. As a result, students did a better job of preparing for assessments.

One aspect of the redo policy that we hadn't anticipated was that many students were able to achieve A-level grades but were unable to maintain A-level mastery. We needed to promote long-term learning, so we began incorporating "review quizzes" into our daily or weekly routines. We chose topics from previous units, gave short unannounced quizzes on the essential skills that pertained to each topic, and incorporated performance on these assessments into the overall grade. In addition to emphasizing the importance of long-term learning, our review quizzes also provided a continuous review of basic concepts that would help students prepare for semester finals.

Students weren't excited about being assessed without advance notice of the topic, but they seemed to understand our rationale for the quizzes. A few students who generally earned As struggled with the review material, which opened their eyes to the fact that they were memorizing material long enough to get the desired grade on a test instead of focusing on learning for the long term. On the other hand, some students who struggled during a particular unit did surprisingly well on a review quiz on the same material. This provided encouragement and a sense of success for students who needed it. For us, it reinforced the idea that students do not necessarily learn on the arbitrary timetable that we set in our classrooms.

The Final Grade

Confident that we had a system for accurately assessing students' mastery, we focused on how to determine accurate final class grades. The system we were using provided categories for homework and daily work, projects, quizzes, and tests; each category had nearly equal weight. However, Wormeli (2006) believes that the final grade should be based on how much students have mastered and not on how much effort they put forth. This idea was new to us.

Our new system consists of three categories: assessments, labs and projects, and practice work. The *assessments* category includes tests, quizzes, oral assessments, review quizzes, or anything else that reflects a student's level of mastery. This category currently counts for 70 percent of a student's final class grade.

The second category, *labs and projects*, is for activities that are necessary to our content areas but that don't really fit into the assessment category. In the science department, the lab category includes work done in the laboratory, as well as written lab reports. The project category is used in math and social studies and includes group research projects, speeches, and presentations. Assignments are graded according to rubrics created for the project or lab, and grades within this category count for 20 percent of a student's final grade.

We decided to call the final category *practice work*. This category includes daily activities such as worksheets, homework problems, and reading assignments that help students master the concepts presented in class. Students are awarded a certain number of points for completing each task, but we do not check each assignment. Instead, students get an allotted amount of time to finish each task, and then we go through the answers with the whole class. In this way, students are allowed to make mistakes during the learning process without being penalized in their grade. This category counts for 10 percent of the student's final grade.

The percentage that we assign to each category reflects our beliefs about what the final grade should mean. Because our rationale was clear to them, most students were receptive to this new approach. Initially, a few students balked at the idea of homework and effort counting for such a small percentage of their final grade. We held firm to our ideas, and now the system is widely accepted among students. In fact, we have recently been discussing reducing the practice percentage to 5 percent and increasing the assessment value.

Wormeli (2006) believes that only assessments determine a student's level of mastery and that practice should not be a part of the final grade at all. We're getting closer to this idea but don't feel our students (or parents) are ready to take that final step. The practice and lab/project categories have a minimal influence

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on the overall final grade, but the fact that they are considered appeases some students and parents.

A New Focus on Learning

Making these changes in our classrooms completely changed our attitudes as teachers. Although we are still busy in our classrooms every day, we spend our time teaching rather than meticulously grading homework that students disregard. We write assessments that accurately measure our students' level of mastery and are able to translate that level into a final grade. Student learning has always been our intent, but now we have a teaching and assessment policy that has elevated it to its rightful place at the head of the class.

References

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