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Effective Grading Practices   Pages 46-51

No Penalties for Practice
Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey and Ian Pumpian

An urban school creates a grading system that reflects understanding—and that doesn't penalize students for practicing along the way.

Confronted with a 55 percent failure rate in Algebra I, the teachers at Health Sciences High and Middle College (HSHMC) in San Diego, California, knew they needed to do something differently.

As is typical of many high schools, grades at the school were based on an amalgam of homework, classroom behavior, quizzes, projects, and tests. Some students were failing because they didn't complete the homework, some because of poor attendance, and others because of low test scores. In discussing what actions to take, one teacher admitted, "We really don't know why most of them are failing. In fact, a whole group of them may actually understand the content but have compliance issues. We just don't know any other way to grade." That admission proved to be the turning point for developing a rigorous yet responsive grading system that measures student understanding of the content standards.

Unfortunately, report card grades often mix compliance and understanding. The percentage that each contributes to students' grades varies across teachers, schools, districts, and states. This is problematic for students and their families, and it calls college admission decisions into question. Homework compliance represents 50 percent of the grade in some schools and only 10 percent of the grade in others. Thus, the student who does no homework yet aces the test could fail in one school and earn a *B* in the other. Making judgments on the basis of grades is suspect at best and delusory at worst.

This stands in stark contrast to what grades *should* do. Although many question the value of grades—especially when they're used to bribe students to complete work (see Kohn, 1999)—when they are given, they should reflect students' understanding of the content. As one teacher noted, "I realized that bringing a pencil to class was not one of the algebra standards."

The Importance of Practice

HSHMC is a public charter high school in which students explore health sciences and health careers; 64 percent of the 550 students served qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, and 70 percent speak a language other than English at home.

The faculty decided that grades should reflect student understanding. This required long and sometimes heated discussion about the role of practice work. Some teachers argued that practice work taught responsibility and should be included in a grade, whereas others maintained that it should be formative and not punitive. A breakthrough in the discussion occurred when an athletics coach observed, "We don't score practices. We score real games." As the group reflected on the idea of scoring practices, which are designed to build skills and habits, a teacher added, "Practice doesn't make perfect; practice makes *permanent*. So we'd better be sure students practice things that build the habits we're looking for."

We want students to practice, both in and out of class, but they should practice things they understand; when they make mistakes, teachers need to teach them again. Much like a coach who observes practice and gives an athlete feedback and instruction, a teacher can use students' practice work to inform instruction. But when practice work is part of the overall grade, students don't take risks, and teachers don't get valuable glimpses into their understanding. Instead, students do whatever it takes to submit the work correctly the first time, even if that means copying from a peer.

The question before us, then, as teacher leaders and a school director, was how to create a grading system that reflected understanding while still encouraging students to practice. Our answer was to develop *course*

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competencies. Course competencies are performance assessments that teachers use to measure what students know and can do with the concepts they've been taught. At the same time, we agreed that staff would be responsible for teaching students about various attitudes and behaviors—and that those issues would not be reflected in grades. We would reserve our grades for showing content proficiency and mastery.

It's About What Students Can Do

Beginning in the mathematics classrooms and then extending to all content areas, teachers developed course competencies (that is, performance assessments). They analyzed the content standards and discussed their essential components, and then designed assessment tools that could ascertain what students know.

Given the wide range of methods of determining student understanding (Popham, 2010), teachers developed a broad set of measures. Some are traditional tests consisting of multiple-choice and short-answer items. Experience with this type of assessment is vital because students are expected to demonstrate their understanding using this format on state accountability measures.

But tests are not the only way to assess student learning. In addition, competencies comprise oral presentations, projects, performances, and writing. They include such assessments as these:

- A 20-page graphic novel retelling the events of the French Revolution, for which the student either creates original illustrations or imports images.
- A 1,500-word essay with a creative component (such as an iMovie or original song) in response to the essential question, "Can you buy your way to happiness?"
- A 25-item exam on polynomials that asks students to explain in writing the problem-solving procedures they used for 10 of their responses.
- A crime story in which the crime is solved using knowledge of DNA, RNA, and genetics.

See Figure 1 for a list of the 9th grade competencies for English.

Figure 1. Ninth Grade English Competencies

Date	Skills Measured	Assessment Format
1st Quarter	Understanding plagiarism; citing and referencing (MLA and APA)	Exam (multiple choice and short answer)
	Summaries, literary response, and analysis	9 weekly literacy letters
	Vocabulary development	9 weekly tests
	Research paper on essential question using writing strategies, applications, and conventions	Research paper (1,500 words) and creative component
2nd Quarter	Media analysis, persuasive techniques, and propaganda	Exam (multiple choice and short answer)
	Summaries, literary response, and analysis	9 weekly literacy letters
	Vocabulary development	9 weekly tests
	Persuasive essay on essential question using writing strategies, applications, and conventions	Persuasive essay (1,500 words) and creative component
3rd Quarter	Analyzing oral communication and speeches	Exam (multiple choice and short answer)
	Summaries, literary response, and analysis	9 weekly literacy letters
	Vocabulary development	9 weekly tests
	Informational report on essential question using writing strategies, applications, and conventions	Informational report (1,500 words) and creative component
4th Quarter	Poetry analysis	Exam (multiple choice and short answer)
	Delivering oral communication	Retelling and dramatic monologue
	Summaries, literary response, and analysis	9 weekly literacy letters
	Vocabulary development	9 weekly tests
	Autobiographical account of essential question using writing strategies, applications, and conventions	Personal statement (1,000 words) and creative component

At HSHMC, the competencies became the outcomes, and teachers began to plan backward to design the scope and sequence of daily lessons. This provided the opportunity to implement the concepts from *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), as teachers had already reached agreement on the enduring understandings that were important to them, such as writing a coherent argument or understanding the effects of a revolution on citizens. As teachers planned lessons to ensure that students were prepared for the various performance assessments, they developed activities and practice tasks that would enable students to receive feedback about their efforts before completing the assessment.

For example, in preparation for a research paper competency, students examined and wrote different types of introductions, such as those that started off with a statistic, an anecdote, or a quotation. Students honed their skills in using in-text citations and references and examined the word-choice techniques that several professional writers used. The research paper competency provided students with the opportunity to demonstrate these skills within the context of addressing a schoolwide essential question, "What is beauty? What is beautiful?" The practice work was ungraded but valuable for developing the skills that students would need for doing the research paper. Teachers graded the research paper according to each student's ability to coherently respond to the question.

For example, after analyzing the practice work tasks, Marcos's teacher saw that he was not yet able to properly cite the works of others. Because she dedicates time during each class for small-group instruction, she was able to further assess him and pinpoint the problem. She discovered that he was confusing some of the *Chicago Manual of Style* methods he had learned in middle school with the Modern Language Association methods he was now required to use. To make matters worse, when he wasn't sure what to do, he made up his own method. His teacher helped him untangle the two approaches and provided additional materials for him to practice with. When he wrote his research paper several weeks later, Marcos proudly earned an 81.

Never Too Late to Learn

The faculty voted that practice work would not contribute to students' grades, but rather that grades would be based entirely on students' demonstration of understanding as measured by the performance assessments. The number of competencies ranged from eight (in algebra) to 17 (in U.S. history). The faculty agreed that students would have to pass all of the competencies in a subject with a grade of 70 percent or better to earn credit for the class. If students didn't pass a competency, they would carry an incomplete in the course until they completed that competency.

The decision to assign incompletes instead of failing grades marked a significant milestone. Instead of assigning failure, we told students that their learning and performance on the competency was simply not complete. It reminded us that different students would require different amounts of time and differentiated instruction to demonstrate competency. At the same time, it gave us a mechanism for ensuring that students would be proficient across the entire course—all students eventually had to pass the same competency—and it enabled us to increase the rigor of our expectations. Our decision to assign incompletes led to the development of one of the school's guiding principles: It's never too late to learn.

If at First You Don't Succeed

As the faculty implemented its ideas about competencies, a number of questions emerged: Would students complete the practice work if it was not part of their grade? What would happen if a student failed to pass the competency? How might teachers align intervention efforts with competencies?

As various situations arose, a system of supports emerged. At the outset, the number of students who completed class work and homework remained about the same as before the competency policy was implemented. As is typical in most high schools, the majority of students complete in-class work, and about 50 percent of students regularly complete their homework.

The adoption of course competencies added accountability for practice work. To be eligible to retake an assessment, the student had to first complete all the practice work. Anyone—not just those who scored below 70 percent—could choose to do a retake. Teachers used multiple forms of the competency exams to minimize testing irregularities. Their workload did not necessarily increase; it just shifted to activities that were more important than grading endless homework.

At HSHMC, students who score below 70 percent have two weeks after the date of the competency to take care of matters on their own. At the end of the two-week period, students who still have an incomplete are assigned lunchtime and after-school tutorials. The school lengthened the lunch period to accommodate the lunchtime tutorial, in which students receive individualized or small-group instruction. Teachers work the 20-minute tutorial period twice each week and then have a long lunch (48 minutes) the other three days. This is a cost-neutral way to increase intervention time.

The after-school tutorials involve lead teachers who are compensated for their time as well as paid peer tutors and paraprofessionals. The after-school tutorial provides students with time to complete practice work to be eligible for retaking a competency.

Students can attend tutorials with any teacher they choose. If they have not cleared their incomplete within nine weeks, they lose the privilege of participating in extracurricular activities. One of the interesting side effects of this policy has been the attention paid to the weekly incomplete list, which is distributed schoolwide. As students approach six or seven weeks on the list, coaches, extracurricular staff members, and peers join the support efforts to ensure that there are participants, players, and audience members at events.

The tutorials are open to all students. Some come to prepare for an upcoming competency; others want to learn more to earn a higher grade. For example, Justin earned a 92 percent on his "New Deal" competency, which was a multiple-choice test. Not wanting an *A-*, he attended several tutorials even

though he had already completed all the practice work. He retook the competency several weeks later and earned a 96 percent, and his final grade reflected his new knowledge.

It Works!

Our competency system has refined our intervention efforts. In most high schools, Response to Intervention (RTI) efforts are not well coordinated and tend to focus on English and math, to the exclusion of other content areas. With competencies serving as a curriculum-based tool for monitoring progress, the teachers at HSHMC are able to determine which students need additional instruction and on which standards. Most RTI efforts, not to mention most grading systems, typically miss some students who have gaps in their knowledge. With competencies—and the need for students to pass all of them—teachers quickly identify specific student needs, which they can address in a timely fashion.

Homework completion rates at the school now exceed 90 percent. When we ask students why they do the homework, we get one of two answers: (1) You have to either do it now or do it later; or (2) It helps you pass the competency. Students see the link between the practice work and their eventual performance; this awareness is important for college, where homework is likely to be assigned but not collected or graded.

In addition, overall grade point averages (GPAs) increased from 2.89 to 3.36. The biggest gains came from students living in poverty (whose average GPA increased from 2.26 to 3.12) and from students with disabilities (whose average GPA increased from 1.30 to 3.02). Although gaps still exist, they're closing. Now, all students are performing better.

Although we see increased understanding in all the work students complete, state test scores are another indicator of student success. The pass rate for the high school exit exam, a high-stakes test administered in 10th grade, is now 92 percent in both math and English. In 2010, 45 percent of 11th graders scored proficient or advanced on the California standards test in English, compared with only 12 percent in 2008. In terms of comparison, HSHMC outperformed similar schools in the state by 11 percent. Comments from an independent audit organized by the administration noted that the school "outperforms all [local] schools in the percentage of students at or above proficiency in English language arts and math."

Ready for College and Beyond

Although the state assessments are important, we didn't develop our grading system to beat the test. Rather, we hoped to provide students with habits they could take with them to college.

One indication that we are succeeding came from Taryn, who moved to Boston to attend Northeastern University after graduating from HSHMC. On winter break, she came back for a visit and talked about her college experiences. She reflected on our grading policy, saying,

> My roommate didn't do any of the homework for our abnormal psych class and got a *D+* on the midterm. I did all the homework, even though it wasn't collected, and I got an *A*. I knew I needed the practice, so I did it.

Grades *can* reflect students' learning. When they do, students rise to the occasion and meet high expectations. They begin to understand that their effort determines outcomes, which is a valuable lesson for us all.

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