

One to Grow On

Finding Your Grading Compass

I wanted to be students' mentor; it was a difficult role reversal when I abruptly became their judge.

I recall standing in the doorway to greet my students one morning during my third year of teaching after I had just completed report cards. As I made small talk with the kids entering our room, I had a profoundly troubling insight. I heard these words in my head: "You could fill out their report cards right now for the rest of the year with 90 percent accuracy." This realization that my grading practices were contributing to a self-fulfilling prophecy marked a transition in my uneasy relationship with grades.

Up to that point, I'd seen student assignments as a mechanism for generating grades, which I recorded faithfully in my grade book so that when parents came to school for conferences I could justify report card grades ("See—here are the 19 grades I averaged to arrive at Jason's C.") The more grades, the more secure I felt.

I'd like to think that even in those days I didn't see grades as rewards or punishments, but maybe I did. Maybe I said to myself, "If I don't grade homework, they won't do it."

I was worried about students who went home class after class, quarter after quarter with low grades. In a naive way, I understood that such discouragement does little to motivate students to embrace the next task with trust or enthusiasm. I also worried about the kids who were supremely motivated to get As but had little interest in learning. I wanted to be my students' mentor; it was a difficult role reversal when I abruptly became their judge.

What I've Come to Know

That epiphany caused me to be more reflective about grading. I can't recall in which order I

drew the following conclusions. Some of them were a long time coming. In the end, they led my grading practices to reflect what I believed about teaching and learning—rather than to dictate how I taught.

- Grading itself contributes little to learning. Grading is a small part of a much bigger, more important cycle of instruction, assessment, and adjustment—which *does* lead to learning.

- My job is to teach for success. To do that, I have to abandon "gotcha" testing and grading.

- The better I teach, the better students' grades will be.

- I need to have a clear set of indicators of success on each assignment and for each unit of study. My students also need to be clear about those indicators—and contribute to creating them.

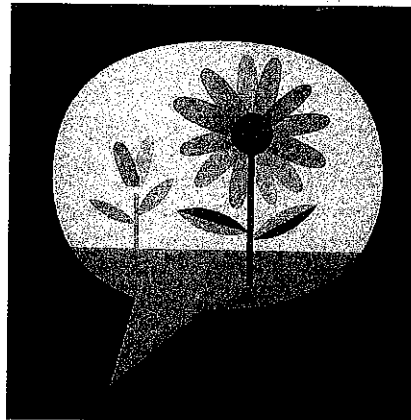
- If I have students who consistently make low grades, there's something lacking in my teaching or in my relationship with those students.

- If I have students who consistently make very high grades with no struggle or need for support, I'm underestimating their capacity—and wasting their time. An A that doesn't represent personal struggle and growth is a lie.

- I need to grade fewer pieces of student work. Most student work should be practice—a time for making errors and figuring out what didn't work. Grading too often and too soon discourages that nonnegotiable element of learning.

- Consistent, specific feedback on a student's competency in essential goals is a more potent teaching tool than a letter or number grade will ever be.

- I need to provide my students with models



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of quality a bit beyond their current reach and then scaffold their progress in reaching that level. Students need to see what quality looks like.

■ No matter how hard I try to replace my judgment in grading with foolproof criteria for success, grading will always have some element of subjectivity in it. Being a professional means exercising professional judgment.

An A that doesn't represent personal struggle and growth is a lie.

■ I should use rubrics and similar tools that define success as a guide rather than as a commitment. I cannot and should not promise students that if they cite four references rather than three or use varied transitions between paragraphs, an A is guaranteed.

■ I need to involve my students often in analyzing their own work and that of their peers according to specified criteria for success. Then I need to teach them how to plan to improve their performance.

■ I need to regularly—relentlessly—show students the connection between the quality of their habits of mind and their work, their progress toward performance goals, and their achievement of those goals—and beyond. In other words, I need to help them exercise their capacity to determine their own success.

Embracing these conclusions has made me a better teacher and made my students more thoughtful, engaged, and self-confident learners. These principles are a compass to guide and stretch me as a teacher. Think about them. Question them. In the end, what matters is not that teachers have identical approaches to grading, but that we all have approaches that stem from and reinforce what we know about teaching and learning. ■

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