

Research in grading and reporting: Examining Practices

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“Inaccurate grades play havoc with students’ lives and our professional integrity” (O’Connor & Wormelli, 2011, pg. 42)

Traditionally, grading practices have served a number of purposes – communicating about student learning; comparing, sorting and selecting students for different programs; as well as motivating and sometimes punishing students. Further confounding our understanding about what grades actually mean, is the fact that there has been a wide variation in which student characteristics were included in the grades assigned; depending on idiosyncratic practices, achievement, aptitude, effort, and and/or attitude might be included.

These mixed beliefs around the purposes of grades as well as the variety of methods used for calculating grades have resulted in disparate understandings about what grades mean as well as distortion and inaccurate communication about individual student achievement.

The research on the use of assessment to support learning and the emergence of standards-based curriculum along with recent research around grade inflation has ignited a careful examination of traditional grading practices.

The current literature in this area highlights the need for grading and reporting practices to both support learning and clarify communication. In order for this to occur, researchers have identified the need for improvements in grading accuracy, consistency, transparency and meaningfulness.

In order to improve accuracy, grades on individual assignments as well as report cards, grades must reflect student achievement of curricular outcomes alone.

This means that other student characteristics such as effort or attitude can and should be reported on, but should not be included in scores or report card grades.

Further, the grades assigned must be based on agreed upon standards of performance relative to the curricular outcomes and must be clearly articulated to students and supported by samples in advance of students completing assessment tasks.

Consistency in grading practices demands that a particular level of student performance on an assessment task would be awarded the same grade by different teachers. Consistency is directly linked to accuracy in that both demand clarity and agreement around performance standards.

In order to support the development of shared standards, teachers must be provided with opportunities to collaboratively score and discuss student work.

Consistency is supported and improved through this process as teachers develop common frames of reference thereby limiting the subjectivity and relativity inherent in assigning grades.

Consistency is also supported through the establishment and implementation of clear policies, guidelines, and procedures for grading. Of particular note with respect to improving both accuracy and consistency is the recognition of a need for an appropriate scale. There are numerous problems inherent in the assignment of a percentage score, but the primary issue is that it is impossible to accurately differentiate levels of performance from 0 to 100 on any assessment task. Accuracy and consistency improves when teachers work with grading scales from 0 to 4 with consideration given for half-points when needed to indicate that students have had partial success at a particular level.

Communicating with all audiences about the policies, guidelines and procedures responds to the need for transparency.

Sharing and, ideally creating, criteria with students about the key components of products and performances and identifying the corresponding scores for those products and performances supports students’ understanding about and ownership of their own learning. Students come to view the achievement of a particular outcome as a series of steps or goals that are supported by the teacher, but within the control of the student.

Another key aspect of transparency is a willingness to discuss assigned grades and share the accumulated evidence, from a variety of sources, which was used to make those decisions along with a willingness to consider additional evidence from a student which might result in changes to those grades.

The concept of meaningfulness in grading is also directly related to clarifying communication between teachers and the various audiences for grades. Moving away from the practice of only providing a single “omnibus” grade for a subject area greatly enhances the communicative potential of grades. Providing outcome-referenced grades also supports student learning by identifying exactly which curricular outcomes have been mastered and which still need work. What this means is that teachers will need to organize their grade books by learning outcomes, and collect evidence about achievement levels relative to those outcomes.

Report cards may still only contain a single grade for a subject area, but teachers, students, and parents would have access to information and evidence from their grade books about the specific areas of strength within that subject area or unit of study.

Because grades play such a critical role in the lives of students, educators must continue to take the leadership role in advocating for accurate, consistent, meaningful, transparent approaches to grading.

In addition, grades must clearly communicate about and support student learning.

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