



The Twelve Days of Christmas Break

By Mary Peters

December 2014

Last weekend, after traveling on a red-eye back from Portland, Oregon, I crashed on my couch for longer than I want to admit. I had just attended and presented at the Annual Grading Conference hosted by the Assessment Training Institute (ATI) and I was exhausted. As I lay there you might think that I would have been reflecting on what the most knowledgeable field experts in the country, including Rick Stiggins, Jan Chappuis, Ken O'Connor, Rick Wormeli and Tom Schimmer, had to say about standards-based grading practices. Truthfully, I did not think that deeply. Instead, vacantly, I binged on a series of classic Christmas movies.

But that night I had an epiphany! The lessons from all those Christmas movies were really about grading! Really, go with me here! The spirit of Christmas is alive in the way we think about our students and how we communicate their progress. So, as you enjoy your break and celebrate the season, I want to share 12 Christmas-spirit-inspired grading practices that were passionately and provocatively shared at the [ATI Grading Conference](#). Each day of your break, ponder just one of these ideas. Contact me via Twitter ([@drmaryp56](#)) and let me know your thoughts on any one of them.

- 1) Grading is about giving. It's not about giving judgment. It is the act of giving and communicating accurate affirmations about where students are in their learning.
- 2) Grading is to motivation as coal is to your stocking. Most students do not work towards getting an A, they work to avoid something less. They fear failure.
- 3) "You will poke your eye out with that." See [A Christmas Story](#) for more on this, but — grades should not be used as weapons. Often times it is the best defense we think we have to manage classroom behavior. If that's the case, then we need to dip into our sack of strategies and discover better tools than grades to encourage positive learning behaviors in the classroom.
- 4) Providing effective feedback about the learning should not be a seasonal event. Like Christmas, we are reminded that the spirit of generously giving effective, standards-focused feedback should be alive all year round.

- 5) There is no naughty or nice list with standards-based grading. Students who fall behind or fail to meet expectations must have a means to recover. When zeros are permanent and when averages are the only math we apply to calculating grades, we doom some students to the 'naughty' list forever. What would Santa say?
- 6) Grade-making is much like toy-making. In order to make sound, desirable toys, the mission, and expectations must be crystal clear and the skills and success criteria well-developed. I imagine this is just how the elves have become master toy makers.
- 7) The holidays are most joyous when we engage in community, exchange cookies and imbibe spirits of choice. This is also true about how to engage in re-thinking your approach to grading. Teachers who work together with the mindset of how to best communicate precisely where students are relative to the learning targets will experience joy. Spirits won't hurt either.
- 8) Do a "Ralphie". When asking children about what they want for Christmas, their list is often very precise. This helps parents know what to get them, avoiding disappointment. Going back to *A Christmas Story*, Ralphie wanted something very specific: Red Ryder Carbine Action 200-shot Range Model air rifle (with a compass). Are you that precise about what you expect from your students? Do students know what to give you to meet your expectations? Are they disappointed by their grades because your assessments and expectations are not always transparent? Must they guess what you want?
- 9) Don't create Grinches. The Grinch's small heart and surly demeanor were the products of neglect and disappointment. What are the long-term effects of on students when our judgments erode their confidence and good will? Remember, that the Grinch's spirit was restored when forgiveness was modeled. But alas, he was late—and for that he should have gotten a '0'... or was it more important that he arrived with the desired set of skills and dispositions?
- 10) Give Rudolph a chance. Do we allow individual students an alternate means to demonstrate their learning or do we require they conform to pre-determined, on-demand assessment? As the story goes, Rudolph and Hermey were isolated on the island of misfit toys for their 'non-conformity'. But, when given the right opportunity, Rudolph saved Christmas!
- 11) Should homework count? Is it really fair for some to do it and others not? Rick Wormeli posited in his book "Fair isn't Always Equal" that we need to reconsider the question. We should be asking: How do we assure each students is getting the positive practice needed to master the learning expectations? Not everyone needs the same fruitcake.

12) The message of the holiday season is ultimately about hope. Good-hearted neighbors and loved-ones shining a light for those whose optimism has dimmed. I hope that as we move into the new year we all bring with us light and good will and apply it to how we think about and apply grading practices.