

Improving Classroom Grading Procedures

Who could forget the anxiety of classroom testing; the unfairness of many grading procedures; or the pain and embarrassment of failure --especially if you were "only average?" Here are some ways to help your students learn more and get better grades.

by **Bill Page**

With tears of anger streaming down her face, my sixth grade daughter slammed the door and in a diatribe of snarling commentary, pejoratives, and loud name calling exclaimed, "That dirty, no good jerk said the test would cover only the last nine weeks work, but almost half of the test was from the first quarter." She was as angry as I had ever seen her. "Yes," she had talked to him about it. "Yes," he had told the class that the test would cover only the last nine weeks, but, "He changed his mind" and she "should have known the other material, anyway." "No!" There is no recourse. He won't consider changing "anything."

Anna had studied extra hard for the test. She was confident in her knowledge and capability. But, the teacher capriciously changed the procedure. Was it "fair?" Had he not lied to her? Was he obligated to stick to the statement about the test coverage? Was my daughter justified in her anger...and in the level of her anger? In her expectation? Should there be any appeal in this incident? Are not all teacher-made tests unilaterally, arbitrarily, autocratically, capriciously determined as to number of questions, material covered, type of questions, scoring, amount of time, etc.?

Individual teacher's grading procedures are, eh, well, *individual*. Each of us, all through our schooling, learned to deal with the grading practices of each of our teachers. Aside from the unfairness of a given test, we remember cases of "confusing, misleading wording," "strictness," "a reprieve," "trick questions," "arbitrariness," "an unannounced change." Probably, we found little consistency in a given teacher's procedures. Rarely did we find any consistency whatsoever among the procedures of different teachers. How many times would it have made a difference in our grade if the teacher had eliminated one question on the test, or changed one or two words?

As students we survived the grading inconsistencies, as evidenced by our having graduated from college. But, for many students grading practices represent a constant threat, a dreaded, anxiety producing, worrisome burden over which they feel little control. We, in our own classrooms, are likely to be inconsistent and may fail to remember the seriousness and the emotional impact a grade, or even a point or two, might have on a given learner--especially the problem learners. Are teacher-made tests sufficiently valid and reliable to grade within a point of distinguishing a B from an A?

Here are some procedures individual teachers can consider using to make a difference, at least in a student's attitude, in his or her morale or discouragement, or in his or her desire to study, learn and prepare:

Zeros are always unfair. Most letter grades have about a 10 point range or less; a zero has a 60 or 65 point range. Usually, an "A" and an "F" averaged together may make a "C", but if the A is 100 and the F is Zero, combined they equal 50 which is an "F." The point value of a zero can discourage a kid. Two zeros make "trying" hopeless (especially for the type of kid who gets

zeros). A kid with two zeros could make six consecutive 80's and still have an F average. Here are some ways to deal with zeros.

1. On tests or assignments that will continue to be included in the averaging through the year -- give an incomplete. Let the assignment be made up. (It would be difficult to justify a kid learning "absolutely nothing" anyway.) Would a kid who regularly gets an F on the 20 weekly spelling words, really be expected to study harder to get three right instead of one right so he gets a "higher" F?
2. Limit the range of an F grade to the same range as the other letters. For instance, start the grading scale at 50 instead of 0.
3. Use the *median* score instead of the average, or use whichever is higher.
4. Declare zeros unacceptable and provide, or negotiate an alternative.

Don't confuse learning with behavior. Grades are supposed to reflect learning. If we include issues such as being late to class, not turning work in on time, not completing assignments or homework, or not using a proper heading, the grade is a misrepresentation. We use this kind of grading to penalize the student so he or she will "behave" properly, but it is grossly unfair to give an "F" in history to a kid who knows the material but who has unexcused absences. What can be done?

1. Use logical consequences rather than a grade reduction. I explain to my students that on the day projects or term papers are due, I set aside time from my family and personal life to evaluate them. Any that are late will not be evaluated until I get "extra" time. That time usually comes after the student has asked about it five times or after he gets his report card with an incomplete for a grade, and has had to explain the incomplete to his parents.
2. Discuss with the class the importance of behavior (in other classes, in college and in life, etc.). Let them know the strength of your concern, but let them know you value learning and accuracy in grading. They'll understand. It's probably a better lesson than a low grade anyway.
3. Explain your dilemma and let the kid come up with an acceptable solution.
4. Discuss "grading as motivation" with the kids.

Grading is influenced by extraneous conditions. Research shows (and we all know, anyway) how powerfully factors such as neatness, prior performance, dress, attitude, manners, parents, demeanor, our own mood, and physical attractiveness are in influencing our judgment. What can we do? Not much, but we can do *some* things:

1. Be alert to the possibility (probability) and at least make a conscious effort to reduce the bias by reminding yourself each time of that possibility.
2. When possible, give kids anonymity by use of a number code or code name. Or at least err on the side of objectiveness.
3. A post-mortem on test papers can do two things: give the kids a chance to question, clarify or challenge the grading, or the questions, and give you a chance to figure out whether some of the kids know more than you gave them credit for.

Use "weighted" tests: Tests at the beginning of a unit should not count as much as those at the end, especially when the ending material requires knowledge of the earlier test and from earlier lessons. Grading the "process of learning" is questionable anyway.

Decide whether you want tests for grading or for learning: If you want tests primarily for evaluation and motivation, then standardization, time limits, and routine is important. But if you want tests for learning then you need to:

1. Let them retake the test as frequently as you feel their progress warrants--an oral check will enable you to see if he has learned more, or is ready to retake it. (And don't "average" the new score with the old one. If s/he now knows the material, s/he shouldn't be penalized for not knowing it previously.)
2. Give students the responsibility and task of showing you that they have learned enough to be permitted to retake the test.
3. Let two low scoring students work with one another and then speak on the other's behalf about his increased knowledge, while you ask a few questions.

Use criterion-referenced standards--not norm standards. The "curve" is unfair. When everyone meets the criteria, everyone gets an A -- Enough said.

Never grade homework. Homework is for practice and feedback. It should never be used for evaluation. Kids should have a chance to make errors or show they don't know, so they can learn. Generally, there are three basic categories or purposes for homework: practice, application; and enrichment.

Avoid giving lower achieving students low grades. At the beginning of a school year or a new marking period a low grade given a "good" student may cause him or her to get serious and pay better attention. But research shows that a poor student is likely to give up figuring that it is bound to get harder and so there is no use even trying. (Don't "give" him good ones either--he knows a phony.) Here are some things you can do:

1. Early in the unit, or year use "practice" tests that don't "count" but can enable him to learn before the "real" test.
2. Let them retake tests to show they've learned.
3. Only grade every third or fourth test.
4. Use comments rather than grades on the tests given in the early learning stages.
5. Let them work in pairs to "grade" the test so that they can use it for learning and get a good grade too.
6. Let kids ask for tests when they think they are ready.

Offer a 10% peremptory challenge to questions on the major exams. Permit each student to eliminate questions they feel are inappropriate or unfair. They need not give a reason; but it should be helpful information to the teacher which questions are selected.

Permit kids to rephrase, rewrite or substitute a question that they deem to be confusing or unfair. Various procedures or rules can be determined to make this a good learning experience. It can even be done cooperatively, after the test or at the time it is turned in.

A class meeting using your best discussion techniques, getting the most honest comments and concerns, showing real interest in emotional and academic welfare, would be a good starting point. And a show of good faith by offering an incomplete, a second opportunity or special consideration could be a prelude to making tests a little more fair. Let kids *learn* from their tests and their errors.

Some home stretch considerations: As we all head for the finish of this school year, there are kids who may have lost hope. There are some who are ready to call it "quits" for the year. We teachers need all the more to talk about learning rather than grades. We need to provide a productive way to use the "lame duck period" for some help.

1. Give the kids a facsimile report card with the final grade penciled in. Also give them the message that it is not too late. Let them erase the penciled grade and show them how it can be improved. The things they didn't learn that will make a difference for next year can still be learned and can still be counted to raise this year's grade.
2. Have some small group sessions where each kid reveals something s/he didn't learn that s/he would like to. Set up some help sessions among the kids. We can start now and work together. Maybe you can bring some older kids in as tutors.
3. Invite next year's teacher in to talk to them. If s/he could give them some specific things to work on, you could then become a resource helping them get ready,(being on their side) and giving them some credit for this year's grades.

Show (Not just tell) them, "IT'S NEVER TOO LATE!"

The class meeting mentioned above would be a good way to let kids know you care, that it's never too late, that you can and will help, and most of all that we are all in this together. Discuss plans to make this a great rest of the school year as the kick-off to make next year an even better one.

<http://teachers.net/gazette/MAY02/page.html>