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Research Matters

The Gray Areas of Grading

Here is a short quiz on grading. Please circle your answer within each statement:

1. Grades (should/should not) reflect behavior, effort, citizenship, or time management.
2. The role of final grades (is/is not) to teach students responsibility.
3. Teachers (should/should not) adjust students' grades based on cognitive ability, giftedness, work habits, or second language background.
4. A final grade (is/is not) an accurate reflection of achievement.
5. Students (should/should not) repeatedly revise a project or essay until they meet the high standards of excellence set for it.

The answers are not to be found at the end of this column. This is a thinking quiz; correct answers don't matter, but your thinking behind your answers does. If the questions get you to think about what, in fact, grades do reflect, if they give you some doubt about how much achievement actually is reflected in your grades, or if you just wonder how your answers

compare to other teachers' answers, then you've done well.

Rick Wormeli has thought a lot about issues such as these. In his recent article, "Accountability: Teaching through Assessment and Feedback, Not Grading," and in his recent book, *Fair Isn't Always Equal: Assessing and Grading in the Differentiated Classroom*, Wormeli questions assessment and grading within the framework of differentiated instruction. His analysis of the issues illuminates the "gray areas" of teaching, where few teachers have the comfort of definitive answers to questions like those in

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our quiz. If you have ever included attendance and classroom behavior in a student's final grade, known that a final grade didn't reflect a student's *academic* achievement solely (e.g., the grade included class participation), changed your grading standards because English

was not a student's first language, or used the final grade as a way of teaching students responsible academic habits, then Wormeli has some things for you to think about, and he offers much insight into these gray areas.

This research is based on a basic and controversial assumption about accountability. Quoting from *Wikipedia*, Wormeli states that *accountability* "implies a concern for the welfare of those with whom one works" ("Accountability" 16). This definition carries the message that "I'm here to help you along, to help you grow." It implies that teachers are learner advocates and have a responsibility to help students grow as learners, just as students have a responsibility to demonstrate their growth as learners: It's mutual accountability. This form of mutual accountability focuses on achievement—that is, we *practice* accountability when we focus on actual achievement and not on nonacademic factors, and we *teach* accountability when we demand that students show their real learning and growth. It sounds simple, but it gets complicated.

In contrast to mutual accountability, Wormeli notes, an alternative and more familiar definition of accountability values threat over concern (i.e., advocacy) for others. One teacher, for example,

“says to her misbehaving students, ‘You will be held accountable for your actions,’ and another says, ‘You better shape up and work hard because I’ll find out who studied and who didn’t when I grade your tests.’ This is the ‘caughtya’ and ‘gotcha’ mentality,” and grading “is one of the default tools teachers use to play the ‘gotcha’ game.” When we play the gotcha game, according to Wormeli, “There is no growth in accountability within the student that will carry over to the next situation” (“Accountability” 16). Students learn to do *whatever it takes to get the grade*; they (and teachers) jostle with one another for *extra points*; teachers award *half off* for

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being late, and the like—or students just give up when there is no longer a chance to demonstrate their learning.

If all of the above sounds like an argument to cut students plenty of slack for their slovenly ways or for their busy extracurricular lives or their bizarre disinterest in our classes, it is not. It is merely a challenge to the ways we enact accountability, and it asks us to think about the complex world where academic achievement, academic habits, and personal traits and behaviors all get mixed up in grading, and all under the banner of accountability. Below are some of the representative problems

associated with this mixture that Wormeli addresses in his research.

Grading Late Work

“When students turn in work late, how we respond can mean the difference between learning and non-learning” (“Accountability” 17), writes Wormeli. In the world of differentiated learning, we must decide if the late work is incidental or habitual. If, for whatever reasons, the student was unable to meet a particular deadline, but usually does meet deadlines, then the late work is incidental, and extending the deadline not only enacts accountability but also teaches compassion. On the other hand, if late work is chronic, we might inquire why before “blindly” punishing. In Wormeli’s view, the teacher

investigates and takes action. She asks the student about his time management, personal responsibilities, and home resources after school hours. She considers whether or not the developmental level of instruction or tasks is appropriate for the student. She attempts to resolve the issues and proceed with the student’s learning. . . . Our goal is that he learns the material. (“Accountability” 18)

Out of fairness to other students who do meet deadlines, Wormeli identifies three choices for teachers grading late work:

- > Take a whole letter grade off the assignment for each day that it is late (*Fair* 148). This is the least preferred option because it sends a punitive message and, if the work is too many days late, it will make the student say, “Why bother?”
- > Take only a few points off for each day it’s late, enough to

“deliver a clear message, but not enough to make the student want to give up learning the material” (“Accountability” 18).

- > Record two grades—the late grade and the true grade, the former to note that it was late, the latter to indicate true achievement.

As Wormeli makes clear, too much goes under the banner of a grade that has little or nothing to do with the *achievement* that a grade is supposed to represent:

A grade is supposed to provide an accurate, undiluted indicator of a student’s mastery of learning standards. That’s it. It is not meant to be a part of a reward, motivation, or behavioral contract system. If the grade is distorted by weaving in a student’s personal behavior, character, and work habits, it cannot be used to successfully provide feedback, document progress, or inform our instructional decisions regarding that student—the three primary reasons we grade. A student who is truly performing at the highest instructional levels with the highest marks, even though it took him longer to achieve those levels—for whatever reason—is not served by labeling him with false, lower marks and treating him as if he operates at the lower instructional levels just because it took him a little longer to get to the same standard of excellence. . . . He’s achieved excellence, and his digressions should not be held against him. (“Accountability” 19)

Turning Zeroes to Fifties

“When using a 100-point scale, should a teacher round zeroes to 50’s or 60’s, or leave them as a zero? Which one teaches students to be responsible?” (“Accountability” 19).

On a scale of 1 to 100, anything below 60 constitutes failing, so should we award a zero for unacceptable work, which puts the grade at the absolute bottom, where the numerical distance to barely passing is so great? Or should we award, say, a 50, which gives the student hope? Wormeli writes, “An F means a student has failed to demonstrate acceptable evidence of mastery, that’s all. . . . Do we really need to have multiple gradations of failure, then? Is it helpful to discern between failure, and absolute, super-loser, no-chance-of-passing-unless-you-get-a-mammoth-pile-of-A’s level of failure? Are we trying to be punitive or instructive?” (“Accountability” 19).

Pointing out that a zero on a 100-point scale is comparable to a –6 on a 4-point scale, Wormeli takes us back to the humane definition of accountability, the one that reminds us that our role is to help, not hinder the student who “perceives that there is a ladder extended to help crawl from the hole. It doesn’t matter why the student failed; effective secondary teachers provide the ladder” (“Accountability” 20). Getting a 50 or a 59 is still failing; but in terms of recovery, it’s not the same as getting a zero, and we ought to be in the recovery business, Wormeli suggests.

Allowing Resubmissions and Retakes

Many teachers allow students to redo work or retake tests, but they don’t usually award full credit the second time around, or they average the revision with the original grade, or something else that says, *No way you are going to get off easy*

(Gotcha). They argue, *If Juan gets an A on that paper when it is due, should Jane get an A too even though she had to revise it three more times after the due date? Something’s not fair if Jane gets an A!* Hmm. If Jane needs extra time for revision as well as extra coaching to demonstrate the same level of achievement as Juan, then should her grade reflect that achievement—or should it reflect achievement as well as multiple revisions and extra time to reach the expected standard of excellence? Did Jane just need something different (differentiated) to show that she can achieve at high levels—different from what others in the class needed?

Further, if we settle for what Jane has produced the first time around, then what are we teaching students about accountability? That they are not accountable for showing what they *can* do? That we are willing to settle for less than they are capable of producing? Seems to make things easier for students.

Wormeli would have us think about test retakes in the same way. That is, if students fail a test or even do poorly short of failing, are we willing to let them off the learning hook? We have to be unwilling to let them “get away with not learning. When we mandate re-takes, however, we are in students’ faces, tenacious, demanding excellence. We hold them accountable. . . . [W]e ask students to go back and redo tasks until they get it right” (“Accountability” 21).

Grading Effort and Behavior

Wormeli cites the instance where a student turned in no homework

but earned straight A’s on all the tests. Should she get an A in the class? After all, she did prove that she could reach the highest standards of excellence. She just proved that she didn’t need to do the homework to ace the tests. She’s different. But what’s fair, you say? Wormeli would respond that homework should be practice, and if someone can demonstrate excellence without practicing, what’s wrong with that? Unless the homework is used to demonstrate incremental mastery all along the way, with each formative piece adding up to a whole that equates with summative mastery, homework falls into that category of “other” when it comes to grades. Included in this category are such work habits as initiative, discussion skills, participation, and effort. The question is, How do any of these things reflect academic achievement? I’m not denying that they contribute to academic excellence, nor would Wormeli; nor is anyone saying that these personal qualities are not important or vital for academic success. But do they belong in a final grade that is supposed to represent mastery in a subject?

Supporting ESL and Gifted Students

While it may seem odd to combine ESL and gifted students in a discussion of grading, it shouldn’t since students in both groups are to be found somewhere on a continuum of achievement, a “journey,” as Wormeli puts it (in the context of writing development, for example): “We take students from wherever they are and move them as far along their journey as

possible in the short time we have them together. Students are at different points in their journey towards writing well, of course, even without ESL, LD, Gifted, or other designations” (“Grading”). Indeed, in the differentiated classroom, we ought to consider all students from this developmental perspective and, if we do, then ESL or gifted students are no different from other students: All reach levels of achievement relative to some standard or some expectation of achievement. “The important question, then,” Wormeli says, “is what do we do with any student who does not meet the curriculum standards or perceptions of excellence?” (“Grading”).

For most LD students who are granted accommodations, it is likely that their grades are recorded and noted as representing modified or alternative standards, and so it should be for ESL and gifted students. If ESL students work hard to meet the quality standards of the course but simply cannot meet them within the time frame of a semester or year, it does no good to grade them equally with their less linguistically challenged peers. What we want to avoid, Wormeli

says, is grading students in such a way that they give up, which can easily happen to ESL students who try all they can but due to the immense language challenges they face, they cannot reach the same standards as their native-language peers.

Similarly, the gifted students who exceed course expectations and standards ought to be graded on the basis of what they actually achieved, and so noted in grade reports. Their grade ought to represent the fact that they not only mastered the standard curriculum but also exceeded it. As is the case in many schools, the solution lies in the method of recording course grades, where a final grade can be awarded and some notation made in the cumulative folder or on the grade report itself (as notes) that the grade is for an adjusted curriculum (still challenging, but in different ways) and accurately represents the student’s actual achievement in that curriculum. In this way, our grading practices do not encourage students to give up or coast but rather hold them to the standards that they as individual learners are capable of reaching: “Let’s grade them in whatever way leads to their learning and personal

investment in writing and reading development,” Wormeli advises (“Grading”).

Reflecting Critically

Rick Wormeli’s views on accountability, assessment, and grading in the differentiated classroom may support or challenge our personal or our school’s grading policies. They may also provide impetus for change in those schools where such humane grading practices as explanatory notes on a report card are not current practice. At the very least, his ideas ought to encourage us to reflect critically on our grading practices, as he hopes: “Give the concepts some thought, try some of them with your students, then shape and share your own thinking regarding grading and assessment in differentiated classes with others” (*Fair xi*).

Works Cited

- Wormeli, Rick. “Accountability: Teaching through Assessment and Feedback, Not Grading.” *American Secondary Education* 34.3 (2006): 14–27.
- . *Fair Isn’t Always Equal: Assessing and Grading in the Differentiated Classroom*. Portland: Stenhouse, 2006.
- . “Grading ESL Students.” Email to Rick VanDeWeghe. 18 Dec. 2006.

EJ 25 Years Ago

The Art of Teaching English

The English teacher as artist will create an intellectually and emotionally stimulating environment; a mindset that caring about books, films, and conversation is a cultural imperative; an awareness that language is a powerful tool to be understood and practiced in its infinite variety; and a feeling that extraordinary features are present in very ordinary entities and experiences, waiting to be discovered and owned by those who reach for them.

Denny T. Wolfe Jr. “In Defense of Teaching as Art.” *EJ* 71.5 (1982): 66–69.