

Extra Credit and Bonus Points

I have made the case that penalties should not be used for behavioral infractions because, among other reasons, they distort achievement, making it appear that students are achieving at a lower level than they actually are. It is, therefore, equally important that student achievement not be distorted upward by the use of extra credit or bonus points. There is a long tradition in middle schools and high schools, especially in the United States, of allowing students to boost their grades by doing things that have nothing to do with the learning goals. Consider this example provided by a high school mathematics teacher in Michigan.

To illustrate the misuse of the point system, consider the food drive that my high school holds each fall. In a well-meaning attempt to encourage motivation for a good cause, some teachers offer extra credit to students who bring in cans of food to donate. Aside from the fact that not all students have an equal opportunity to boost their grade . . . think about the message that this practice sends to kids about the meaning of "points." It shifts their focus from demonstrating what they have learned and toward collecting as many points as possible. (Huhn, 2005, p. 81)

Over the years, I have heard of many examples of extra credit, ranging from bringing in tissues to attending basketball games. My favorite example is found in this quote from a letter to the editor written by a high school senior in central Pennsylvania:

Recently it was "Dress like an Egyptian Day" at my school. If we dressed like an Egyptian, we got extra credit. When we didn't (which the majority of the kids didn't), our teacher got disappointed at us because we just "didn't make the effort." . . . One of the most frustrating things in

104 HOW TO GRADE FOR LEARNING, K-12

my mind is that we get graded on something that has no educational value. I would very much like to discontinue these childish dress-up days.—Jennifer Starsinic, Hummelstown (Starsinic, 2003)

Grades are supposed to be measures of achievement, so it is appropriate that students have "extra" opportunities to improve their grades, but these opportunities must involve demonstration of the knowledge and skills in the standards, as the opportunities described above did not. If these extra opportunities to improve grades are to be valid, it is equally important that the additional demonstration of knowledge and skill be at a higher level of achievement, not just more work earning more points. Thus, it is inappropriate to have bonus points on tests that simply make it appear that students' achievement is higher than it really is. It makes no sense for a student to be able to score 70 points on a test that has a maximum recorded value of 50 points. Furthermore, the questions for the bonus points are usually the questions that distinguish between competence and excellence, so all students should be expected to attempt these questions.