



CHAPTER 9

Ten Approaches to Avoid When Differentiating Assessment and Grading

If we want to differentiate instruction and assessment yet also provide helpful feedback, document progress, and inform our instructional decisions, we must do everything we can to make sure the grades students earn at any level are accurate renderings of mastery. This requires critical examination of some commonly accepted but often inappropriate grading practices. Let's examine the top ten practices to avoid when differentiating instruction and assessment.

1. Avoid incorporating nonacademic factors, such as behavior, attendance, and effort, into the final grade. (See the rationale given on this in the preceding chapter.)
2. Avoid penalizing students' multiple attempts at mastery.

Not allowing multiple attempts at mastery is another way of saying we don't allow work or assessments to be redone for full credit. Many of us have said the following to students: "You can redo the test, but the highest grade you can earn on it is a B out of deference to those who studied hard and achieved an A the first time around," "For every problem you go back and correct, I'll give you half a point of credit," or "You can retake the test, but I will average the new grade with the original one."

If we hold such a philosophy and a student has been giving sincere effort during the unit, we are holding the student's development against him or her.

I would be alarmed if more than 75 percent of my students were failing because I would think I had missed the mark somehow. So that begs the question, at what point do I begin to wonder where I've not succeeded in my responsibility? Am I satisfied with a 75 percent mark? Or an 85 percent or a 95 percent for having my students pass my class or pass that test?

—Marsha Ratzel, secondary teacher

This is an unfair stance. The truth is, not all students are ready to receive what we have to offer, nor are they ready to learn at the same pace as their classmates. Even adults learn at varying paces from one another. Adolescents and young adolescents have amazingly varied rates of learning—they are all in dramatic transition. What sticks with one student won't stick with another, and even within the same student, there is tremendous inconsistency. A student who always “gets it” early in the unit or year suddenly has trouble with something else later in the year, and it's not clear why.

The fastest growth spurt in human development is from age zero to two. We change more during this time physically, emotionally, and intellectually than at any other time outside of the uterus, and the pace of development of any one portion of the mind or body is different from person to person. Given this, it would be rather absurd, even abusive, to demand that all young humans recite the alphabet in the eighth hour of the fifth day of the tenth month after the second year of their lives. Most toddlers are not in school, however, so this variance doesn't pose any grading concerns.

Now, advance forward to young adolescence and adolescence, which is the next most dramatic transformation physically, emotionally, and intellectually of our lives. Ages ten to eighteen rival ages zero to two in terms of how much we change. It is just as absurd, even abusive, to demand that all 180 students we teach demonstrate 100 percent proficiency with 100 percent of the test in this exact test format at 10:00 A.M. on this one Tuesday in the second week of October. How arbitrary and without justification it is to declare that the third of February is when everyone will be at the same point in their mastery of *The Federalist Papers*, and there's no chance earlier or later to demonstrate and be given credit for full mastery.

Imagine the negative impact on a student who needs another route, a few more examples, or another few days to process information before successfully capturing Boolean logic or a geometry proof. The teacher who teaches the unit of study but then tests the student before he or she has mastered everything makes a common and an understandable mistake. We can't know the perfect time to assess every student's level of proficiency. This isn't a problem, however, because we use that feedback from the initial assessment, reteach or assist the student, and allow him or her to try again. We're out for students' success, not just to document their deficiencies.

The ineffective and unethical response, however, would be to get in the way as the child strives to learn and demonstrate understanding to the fullest extent. The teacher who denies the option to redo tasks and assessments in order to reach the standard of excellence set for students has to reconsider their role: Is the teacher in the classroom to teach so that students learn, or is