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Assessments and Grading in the Modern Secondary Classroom

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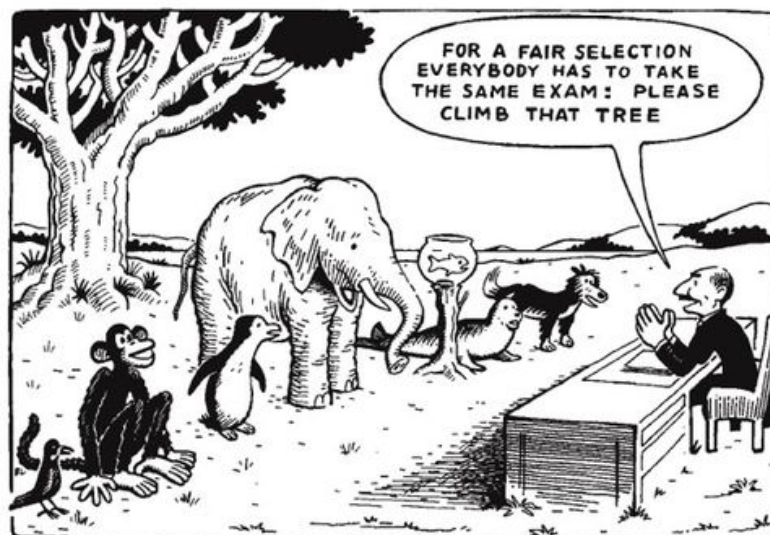
Given the current landscape of the educational system in the United States – the theories, practices, thoughts, and ideas concerning assessments and grading in the modern classroom could be described as unclear at best. Discussions debating the proper configuration and orientation of curricular standards currently control national and state education offices. Teachers and administrators must annually wrestle with the standardized assessments vs. individualized differentiated instruction battle. How can we best individualize the needs of each student while still adequately preparing them for the road ahead? What is an accurate grade and how is it best communicated? How can we accurately assess the academic proficiency levels of students so as to incorporate their body of work, but not to penalize them for the learning process? Current literature provides one simple, yet very ambiguous, response – there is no right answer. There are, however, many guidelines and principles that can be utilized across all grade levels and subjects to most effectively respond to the needs of both parties integrally involved – the student and the teacher.

Differentiated Education

Since the release of *The Theories of Multiple Intelligences* (Gardner, 1987), teachers and administrators have attempted to shift the viewpoint of education to an individualistic approach with the student being at the center of the equation. Each student walking through the door on the first day of a new year has a different mentality about education. Given their different mindsets, they will inherently learn differently (Dweck, 2006). As a system, we have grown to understand and accept this as an absolute truth. For any given lesson, a teacher must prepare activities that benefit the individualized needs of kinesthetic, auditory, and visual learners – or any combination thereof – in order to most effectively convey the material for the student's

acquisition. When it comes to assessments and grading, however, there has not been a shift from the traditional paradigm.

The age-old approach of high-stakes testing simply limits and inhibits the effectiveness and reliability of assessments. Rather than being used as a diagnostic tool to fine tune or refocus instructional methods and content, the assessments have been used as a means to compare and categorize students, schools, and educators. The co-chair of a study conducted by the National Research Council concluded that modern assessments have led to a “misalignment of high-stakes accountability... and instructional practices” as well as a “failure to make full use of classroom assessments to enhance instruction and learning” (Pellegrino, 2002). A confounding and difficult point to accept is that in the same period of time assessments have begun to lose all credibility both nationally and locally, our understanding and development of sound assessment structure and practice has grown exponentially (Pellegrino, 2002; Black & Wiliam, 2005). To close the gap between insufficient and sufficient use of assessments, a shift in focus needs to occur to enhance the use and more accurately depict a student’s level of proficiency in the content area.



Unknown Artist, 1960's
(Wormeli, 2013)

Push for an increased frequency of assessments

In a somewhat controversial piece, Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam (1998b) made the notion that increasing the amount of assessments will actually raise our instructional efficiency. At this point in time, the term *assessment* had already garnered a great deal of negative publicity and the idea of increasing the amount of assessments in the classroom was not openly received. The data presented by the authors, however, was overwhelming. The problem with the public media portrayal of assessments in the classroom was, and is, not in the prevalence of its coverage, but in the lack of understanding and ambiguity in the reporting. Black and Wiliam had been pushing for an increase in daily formative assessment, not the type of high-stakes summative assessments many people outside the classroom have come to know, understand, and dislike.

Formative Assessment vs. Summative Assessment

The basis of a well-written assessment should accurately check the proficiency level of a student in a given content area against a pre-determined set of standards. Overall, the end goal of any particular subject's curriculum is to lead that particular student down a path of mastery¹. The problem with high-stakes summative assessment is it does not accurately reflect a student's overall level of proficiency, but rather a brief snap-shot in time along a continuum of progress (Wormeli, 2013). Conflicting factors affecting the student's psychological state, and thus their academic state, are almost endless on any of these *snap-shots*. Through a multiple assessment approach, educators can more accurately define a student's growth toward mastery (Wormeli, 2013).

1 – mastery – “students have mastered content when they demonstrate a thorough understanding as evidenced by doing something substantive with the content beyond merely echoing it” (Wormeli, 2013)

Another issue with the high-stakes summative assessment approach is the lack of feedback existing along the continuum. How is a student to know and understand not only their deficiencies for remediation and re-teaching but also celebrate their proficiencies? Through an appropriate use of formative assessments along the way, a student can better demonstrate their growth throughout the curriculum (Black & Wiliam, 1998a). Alternatively, a teacher can further assist a student if they understand their strengths and weaknesses along the way.

A formative assessment is merely a glimpse into the students' level of understanding at any given point in time throughout a unit. These formative assessments are typically very brief in nature but can offer a great deal of data to a teacher attempting to connect with his or her students. By simply adding open discussion questions to an information rich lecture, you can gauge whether or not the students are soaking in the content (Hannel, 2009). Alternatively, you could provide weekly review quizzes during the course of a unit to further assess students' growth. Continual and frequent use of these formative assessments will greatly increase the effectiveness of instruction. Further research has even indicated the effectiveness of using this strategy beyond primary education in the realm of higher education – the university (Laight, 2010; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

The most important aspect of these assessments, however, is not in their frequency of use but in the resulting action generated from the data gathered. For example, providing multiple quizzes, discussion questions, and practice does little benefit for a student if they are not provided feedback and instructional modifications where necessary (Wormeli, 2008). Failing to recognize the diagnostic ability of a formative assessment undermines the entire basis of its existence. However, accurately and effectively using information gathered from a formative assessment to best address the varied academic needs of the student validates and celebrates its

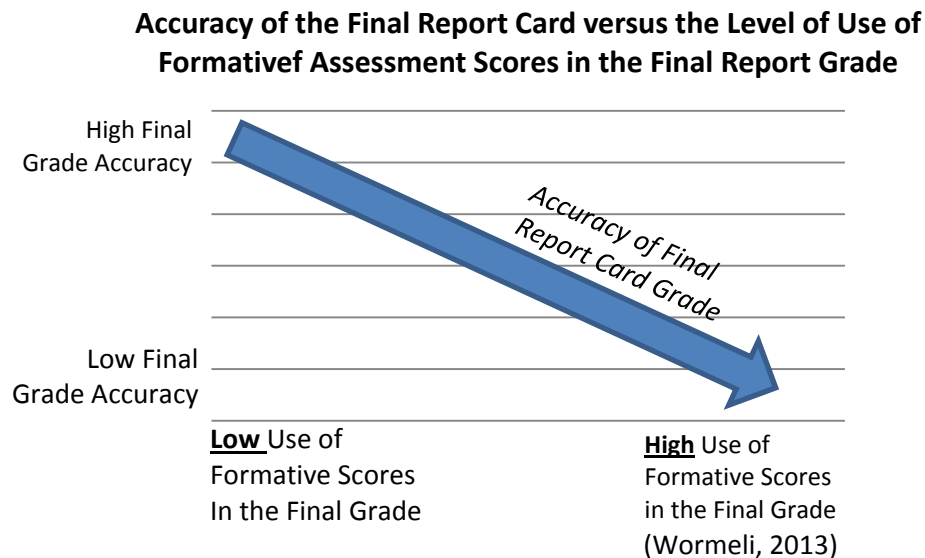
intended purpose. Providing ample, but specific, feedback to the students regarding their current grasp of the content and concepts can serve as one of the single most important factors in academic improvement (Wormeli, 2006a).

Through the exposure to sound instructional methods and contextually relevant formative assessments, the student should be in a position to best demonstrate his or her level of proficiency on a summative assessment. In its most accurate portrayal – this is the final exam encapsulating all of the material the student was expected to learn. The student should demonstrate a level of proficiency on the summative assessment consistent with observable growth throughout the formative assessments (Johnson & Jenkins, 2006). A summative assessment should not, however, be conducted until after a student has demonstrated some level of growth towards mastery in formative assessments.

Grading in the modern classroom – an ethical breach of conduct...

Given an understanding of formative assessments and summative assessments, the next question is how does an educator incorporate the body of work into a student's overall grade profile? As Rick Wormeli noted in a recent conference on assessments and grading (2013), "a student's grade should depict their current and most recent level of proficiency. Anything else would be a breach of conduct and is unethical and immoral." The rationale and justification behind Wormeli's commentary conflict with the traditional view on student grade calculations. Historically speaking, a student's grade was typically calculated by taking the mathematical average of the entire body of work. This incorporated the daily practice, class participation, quizzes, activities, assessments, and any extra-curricular material – Kleenex Boxes, behavior, parent signatures, etc. – justified into a numerical score. The problem with this calculation,

however, is the accuracy of the student's grade report loses credibility (Wormeli, 2013). Rather than being a numerical depiction of a student's level of mastery against a set standard, the grade becomes an ambiguous summation of a multitude of factors. In fact, Wormeli (2013) and Robert Marzano (2006) argue that the accuracy of the final grade report greatly diminishes the more you add in extra information. The weight of practice and formative assessment should remain in the value of feedback and not in the summation of a student's overall body of work. "By including assignments, daily practice, and extra credit for bringing in Kleenex Boxes – a teacher is knowingly falsifying a student's grade report and, therefore, breaking a moral and ethical obligation to the student." Further literature supports the value of a grade as a means to communicate – not compensate (Marzano, 2006).



Beyond the individual weighting of each aspect of the overall grade, it is important to recognize and adapt the way the educational system numerically depicts a student's growth toward mastery. Current literature suggests a large culture shock to the traditional grading system. According to Wormeli (2006) and Marzano (2006), two national leaders in assessments and grading, the educational system should rid of the 100-point scale and mathematical averages

on which most teachers rely. From their studies, a more accurate depiction of a student's proficiency would be the mode of several repeated assessments over a longer period of time.

Another rut of misconception teachers and administrators fall into is in the unwillingness to provide students an opportunity to retake and redo assessments. The learning process is not a finite time-line in which a student either wins or loses. The learning process, as current literature suggests and defends, is an ongoing continuum in which a student constantly and progressively advances toward mastery. Now, this should not be confused with an endless cycle of continual assessments, but rather an opportunity for students to learn and grow from mistakes and misunderstandings in the content. To put the theory to test, a student that repeatedly scores 70% on summative assessments could be defined as a 70% proficient student. However, the goal in education is mastery. Thus, what are the possibilities of improvement if an educator provides ample and specific feedback to the student, allows for remediation and reteaching, and then provides a second summative assessment to recheck progress? As opposed to cutting the line on the content, additional opportunities are provided for the student to further grow and develop. After a second attempt, the student is able to further demonstrate their level of understanding and now scores 85%. The value of the improvement may seem insignificant for any one unit – but how much does it mean over 12 years of primary education? Providing, and requiring, additional opportunities for the student to further immerse and comprehend the material can and does benefit the student tremendously (Wormeli, 2009)

Summary

The goal of the educational system in the United States is to encourage, facilitate, and achieve strong academic development of all types of students. As students enter the classroom, educators and administrators must not only be mindful of the learning styles in which each

student struggles and excels, but also the instructional strategies and approaches that can best foster a positive environment stimulating academic growth and development. An increase in formative assessments, coupled with strong specific feedback, can not only greatly impact the capabilities of a student but also influence the teacher. The benefit of a formative assessment transcends beyond its feedback role to the student and into the planning and response role of a teacher. Furthermore, it is important that teachers heavily rely on formative assessments to gauge progress, but not measure mastery. The true representation of a student's level of mastery should solely come from repeated observations of well-designed summative assessments. The perfect cookie-cutter way to teach all students simply does not exist – all students, teachers, and schools are very different from one another. There are, however, these simple guidelines and practices which can be followed to best enhance the learning process.

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