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

he or she there to present curriculum then hold an assessment "limbo" yardstick and see who in the class can bend flexibly and fit within its narrow parameters?

Reality check: Middle and high school teachers can't teach children individually all the time. We could never give each student a test on a different day according to when he or she is ready. We teach the masses. In order to not lose our sanity, we have to make and hold some deadlines. That's fine, but when it comes time to generate the letter grade that will declare mastery or lack thereof, we have to respect the student's individual development and consider that everyone learns at a different pace and in a different manner and, perhaps more important, that these variances are not setbacks, negative, or punishable.

Education expert, Dr. Nancy Doda, puts it succinctly: "We don't want to admonish students for not learning at the same pace as their classmates. We don't want it to become, 'Learn or I will hurt you.'" When we hold students to one moment in one particular day of the school year to demonstrate mastery in a topic, we are telling them that they must learn at the same rate, to the same extent, and with the same tools and resources as their classmates, or they will suffer. This isn't teaching.

If we really want students to reflect on their mistakes and revise their thinking and/or performances, they have to know their efforts will count. If we want them to heed our feedback on their work, they have to know that it can be used to improve their status. Nolen and Taylor make the case well in *Classroom Assessment*:

> *Feedback that is given on an assignment that can't be revised or that is not clearly and specifically related to future work is unlikely to be seen as useful by the student. Policies that give only partial credit for revisions are little better than no-revision policies—why should the student spend time and effort revising something if the best he can hope for is a slight improvement in the grade, despite the fact that he now understands how to do the work? (2005, p. 60)*

Nolen and Taylor remind us that teachers who are focused on students' growth and mastery usually allow work and assessments to be redone. They say that teachers who are primarily focused on how students do in comparison to others, a limiting reference for differentiated instruction teachers, usu-

> The only thing that counts for the grade on the report card is how students do on assessments. I try to have several different types of assessments for the students so kids who bomb tests can be successful. I also allow students to retest as many times as they need to, to show me they know the concept or skill. All other aspects of grading I address in the comments section of the report card. This includes the amount of assignments they complete (or don't complete), absences and tardies, behavior issues, etc.
>
> I was nervous about the change, but I saw kids who had failed until seventh grade being willing to take a risk and try on some assignments. Instead of a grade, I wrote feedback to let kids know what improvements were needed and what they were doing right. As the year went on, I got more classwork and homework turned in than I ever did when it was part of the grade. I saw kids become more confident in their abilities, and grades reflected what the kids could do. I was amazed at the difference! I know how I'll be grading next year.
>
> —Lisa Pierce, secondary teacher

Success Story!

Success Story!

> Retesting: When my principal challenged me to consider the implications for those who weren't playing the system, I tried it. After seeing how many kids went from failure to success (or degrees of success), how it promoted a culture of self-improvement, and how it reduced test anxiety, I had to admit she was right [about allowing retesting]. While I do see students who take advantage of retesting situations (and I deal with those as they present themselves), there are also a large number of students who benefit from multiple opportunities to "get it." It's the re-exposure and practice that happens during the rewrite process that is the magical ingredient . . .
>
> —Brenda Dyck, educator and author

ally do not allow work and assessment to be redone. In addition, Nolen and Taylor write:

> *If the purpose of grades is to communicate achievement, teachers are likely to give students full credit when revisions or retakes demonstrate better achievement. . . . The rationales behind various partial-credit strategies are similar to those behind various late-work policies. "It's not fair to those who did a good job the first time around," "It's a throwback to proponents of norm-referenced grading." . . . If grades are meant to stand for the students' level of competence at the end of the quarter, semester, or year, teachers must ask themselves, "Does it matter how quickly they reached competence? Does it matter if it took extra feedback or a second revision?* (2005, p. 301)

ask teachers

In a differentiated classroom, teachers often allow students to redo assessments for full credit. Chapter 10 takes a closer look at what this means for teachers and students.

3. Avoid grading practice (homework).

Homework is never to learn material the first time around. Successful teachers don't give homework unless their students have already mastered the concepts. If students have a partial understanding of something and we ask them to practice or rehearse the material in the homework assignment that night, we are doing them a disservice. They will learn it incorrectly, and it will take ten times the emotional and intellectual energy to go back and undo "bad" learning. This is a side effect of confabulation.

Confabulation is when the mind seeks the big-picture connections of something it has learned, and when it doesn't find all the pieces of the puzzle, it makes up information or borrows from other memories and inserts false information into the holes of missing understanding. The worst part is that the mind convinces itself that this entire picture is the original learning. It has difficulty detecting what was true and what was confabulated for the sake of the big-picture requirement. No matter what we do as teachers, our students' minds will be trying to create the larger contexts in which all content and skills fit—regardless of whether we provide it.

> Rethink homework if it is a major reason kids are failing.
>
> —Eileen Bendixen, secondary teacher

Your brain is trying to make connections right now as you read these words: You're thinking about whether

confabulation is true, whether it fits with what you know already, how it compares with other cognitive theory information you've received over the years, how you will categorize it in your mind, how you will use this knowledge when you work with particular students, who among your colleagues might be interested in hearing about this, and where the author is going next with this information. If you were a student of mine and we had several days together to interact on this topic, we'd be able to prevent a majority of misconceptions that arise in your thinking, and we'd tackle confabulated learning to the ground. Two of the greatest allies in the battle against confabulation are frequent assessment and revision of instruction.

Take this idea back to homework, assessment, and grading: Homework is given after students have mastered material. It's assigned so that students can practice, reinforce, elaborate, prepare, and extend their understanding, not to learn something "cold." We are skating on thin ice when a student says he doesn't understand something and we respond, "Do the homework assignment. It will be made clear to you."

Does this mean we occasionally give different homework assignments for different students, or take away homework entirely one evening for a subset of students? Sure. What is fair isn't always equal, and we're out to be fair and effective as teachers. The next night's homework for these students who didn't master the topic today includes material asking them to practice today's concepts as well as tomorrow's concepts. The rest of the class won't get this kind of homework tomorrow night. As long as we make a practice of extending this offer to everyone and students don't perceive that we significantly increase or decrease someone's workload over the course of a week, they'll accept the different requirements and timing.

The following brief descriptions establish a rationale for this premise: In differentiated classrooms, we don't grade homework. Homework is practice, not a demonstration of mastery, and letter grades are saved for declarations of mastery. Letter grades are given post-learning; homework is assessed *while* learning. Be clear, though: We must give feedback on homework, and we give feedback on homework without using grades. If we feel we need to grade the collective homework for a grading period in order to coerce students into doing it, a small percentage is the most we should apply. More about this later.

No adult would put up with being graded on his or her route to come to know a concept. Imagine an education professor who teaches a complex teaching approach and tells us that he will visit our classrooms in one month to evaluate our proficiency with it. "You have one month to practice this," he tells us. One week into that month, however, he shows up to see how we're doing, gives us some feedback, then adds, "I'll be using my observations of you today in your final grade at the end of the month." Many of us would cry foul in such a situation because we were just beginning to practice the concept; we weren't ready to demonstrate full proficiency.

This is analogous to putting a letter grade on a student's math homework. We taught students how to determine faces, edges, and vertices on eight different three-dimensional solids on Tuesday, and the student practices it that night. How fair is it to grade that student's practice with it? Wouldn't the grade be more ethical and accurate by first processing the practice attempts with the student, then giving more practice experiences, exploring the concepts further, providing more practice, building the student's automaticity with the concept, then finally declaring that tomorrow he or she will be assessed officially on the concepts to determine level of mastery?

If we grade students' practice or their steps in coming to know a concept, the final grade is not accurate. It does not represent pure mastery. It represents what the child knows and is able to do as well as all the practice attempts and immature understanding of the concepts along the way. We don't do this in the "real" world of adults where we're always given the highest grade that represents our mastery. Past, occasionally inaccurate explorations are not held against us. We should afford the same courtesy to young adolescents and adolescents.

The most important response to a student's homework assignment is feedback, not grades, and grades in general are poor forms of feedback. Some teachers claim, however, that students will not do homework assignments if they are not graded.

This notion is false. There are many ways to make homework compelling without resorting to grades, but those ideas are beyond the purview of this book. If readers are interested, let me recommend the works of Robert Marzano (1992, 2000), Ken O'Connor (2002), Neila Connors (2000), and Harris Cooper (2001) as well as the chapter dedicated to the topic in my own book, *Day One and Beyond* (2003).

I ran across a teacher in New York state a year ago who counts daily quizzes as 50 percent of the final academic grade. These quizzes have a few questions, and they are completed during the first few minutes of every class. They are based on the previous night's reading. The teacher claims that students won't do the reading unless they know they will be quizzed on the material the next day, so those grades count heavily in order to motivate reluctant students.

I asked this teacher what his grades represent. He said, "Mastery of the material." Then I asked him whether the grades on these quizzes represent mastery of the material or just that students did the reading—a work habit. He said they indicated both.

I disagree. After students read something, they need time and expertise to help them process the information. At a minimum, the teacher should have helped them interpret and apply the information learned in the previous night's reading and given them more practice with the material before ever considering a formal assessment for mastery. The teacher's grades don't reflect what students know and are able to do. Fully half of the grade's declaration in

this situation is based on whether a student did what was asked, not what he or she understands. The grade can no longer be used to document progress, provide feedback, or inform instructional decisions.

Daily quizzes that are announced in advance and given to make sure students do homework are more likely to invite students to cheat than to be declarative assessments of learning. They are more about compliance than standards. We may or may not agree with this sentiment for each of our quizzes, but it makes sense to reflect on their use: Are we giving this quiz to keep students "on their toes" and working, or are we giving the quiz to assess student learning and provide feedback? Is it both? Do we give quizzes in order to catch students making mistakes with their time and learning, or to truly aid their growth? And, of course: Is the quiz going to yield accurate information about students' proficiency? In reality, it's normal to use quizzes as both cattle prod and thermometer, but we should lean toward the thermometer.

What if there are other factors impacting a student's ability to complete homework assignments? Some of my students over the years have been in charge of their younger siblings because their parents worked four jobs between the two of them. The parents didn't arrive home every evening until after ten. My students in those families were in charge of dinner, bathing little brothers and sisters, and laundering their clothing, as well as discipline and making sure everyone's homework was done. By the time everything was done, they were exhausted. Some even worked in local businesses after school prior to going home to those responsibilities. The eight pages of reading about the Spanish-American War, the sinking of the USS *Maine,* and the rise of yellow journalism that I assigned students to read and summarize for homework pales in importance under such conditions.

John Buell, coauthor of *The End of Homework: How Homework Disrupts Families, Overburdens Children, and Limits Learning* (2001), reminds us that homework is unfair to impoverished children. He says they do not have the tools, resources, and school focus required to make homework a useful learning tool. Quite often, they are in survival mode, not able to think beyond how to get food, clothing, and medicine for themselves and their families, let alone contemplate the symbolism and character dynamics in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby,* a novel to which they have trouble relating as it is. This isn't to say impoverished students shouldn't be taught these things or that they should have serious intellectual requirements for them lessened to any degree. In fact, for many impoverished children, it is the highly challenging intellectual pursuits, and the stories of other cultures and people, that provide momentary escape from the palpable despair of daily poverty and impetus for surmounting their conditions. Highly challenging, academic work has been proven over and over again to be among the most powerful ways to respond to children of poverty. Wright's *Black Boy,* Conroy's *The Water Is Wide,* and Meier's *The Power of Their Ideas* provide clear examples.

What this means is that instead of just presenting and documenting students' failures, teachers must remain vigilant for responsive teaching. If something isn't working because of the student's context, we change the tasks, tools, resources, assessments, or environment to build valid success. Buell infers that teachers who mandate homework and penalize impoverished students who don't complete it well or at all are being insensitive. He says there is no solid evidence to support the current emphasis on students doing large amounts of, or even daily, homework.

Whether we agree with Buell based on our own teaching and learning experiences doesn't matter as much as questioning our status quo does. By doing that, we purposefully expose our own thinking every year and pose the question: Is this homework assignment, and our requirement that it be done, in the best interest of my students' growth and learning? If not, what can I change to make it more helpful?

ask teachers →

Given all of this, how much should homework count in an overall academic grade? Very little. Most school districts suggest 10 percent. Any more than this dilutes the accuracy and thereby, usefulness, of a final grade. Ten percent is enough to serve as a carrot in front of the horse's mouth or a stick on the horse's back side, if that's what we think we need with our students, but it's not so much that it would distort declarations of mastery in most cases.

Homework here refers to tasks assigned to students who have already mastered the material. These are check-and-zero assignments such as answering questions on a worksheet, solving practice problems, reflecting on a current event, and/or creating flashcards for vocabulary words. Remember, homework's purpose is to practice, reinforce, extend, and prepare students, never to learn material for the first time. Homework is only assigned if students have a good grasp of the material already. If they don't, the homework is not assigned, or an alternative assignment that requires students to practice only those aspects they have already mastered is provided.

4. Avoid withholding assistance (not scaffolding or differentiating) with the learning when it's needed.

Imagine the situation in which a few students are struggling to make sense of text and the teacher provides a matrix or similar graphic organizer to help structure their thinking. Using the prompts from the organizer, these once-struggling students are now able to identify and organize salient information; they learn well. When it comes time to take the test, they are competitive with the best thinkers in the class.

Is this fair? Yes.

Are the grades for all students in this class accurate renderings of what they know and are able to do? Yes. The limitations to learning have been removed.

If we did not allow students to use the supporting organizers, yet still administered the same test, the struggling students would not have a chance. They would have floundered once again, and the grades written at the top of their tests would not indicate what they were capable of achieving. In the example mentioned in an earlier chapter of a student who needs glasses, we deny that student a fair and accurate rendering of mastery when we remove the glasses in the misguided attempt to be equal. Again, what is fair isn't always equal.

If we want grades to be accurate indicators of mastery, then we have to remove any barrier to students coming to know the material, as well as any barrier to their successful demonstrations of mastery. To not do either of these tasks makes any subsequent grades earned false; they are based on misinformation, and the grade is no longer valid or useful. Barriers in instruction and assessment include inappropriate testing formats, requiring all students to learn at the same pace as their classmates, using the same tools with all students when different tools are needed by some, inflexible teaching, and narrow focus curricula, among others.

By the way, is it appropriate to offer those same graphic organizer to all students if we're going to offer it to a few? Sure. Remember, the most professional thing we do sometimes is to get out of our students' way. Truly, some students won't need them, but some will. Using them doesn't make it easier, it actually pushes students farther than they would be pushed without them.

Remove barriers to learning by providing support when needed.

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5. Avoid assessing students in ways that do not accurately indicate their mastery.

Okay, let's stop here and assess everyone who is reading this book. I'd like you all to express what you know about differentiation, grading, and assessment through a six-minute interpretive dance. You have three days to prepare the dance. You must be accurate, you must incorporate three major concepts within each of those areas, and you must cite all your sources properly.

Some readers would find this task intriguing, even motivating. Many others would be appalled. They'd ask for extensions, special resources/tools, coaching, alternative formats, or they might even pursue unethical means to pass the assessment. Many would lose hope. Welcome to the world of students who learn differently. A regular, no-nonsense, traditional test can stir the same reactions in many of our students.

Consider the following word problem:

> Each new military jet costs 7.8 million dollars. The government wants to purchase eleven of them but has only 83 million dollars to spend. Will they be able to purchase all eleven jets?

Which operation(s) should students use to solve this word problem? Multiplication and subtraction. How do we know this?

Seriously, how do we know this?

Most of us probably have a picture in our minds: An image of a plane with "7.8 million dollars" written over it. Then maybe we realize that all we have to do to solve the first part of this problem (yes, we realize there will be more than one part) is to add 7.8 million dollars to 7.8 million dollars to 7.8 million dollars to 7.8 million dollars and so on. Just as soon as we imagine this, however, we realize that this repeated addition is the same as multiplication which is much faster. Then we start searching for which numbers to multiply, and based on our understanding of the picture in our heads and what we think the problem is asking, we choose to multiply 7.8 million and eleven. Whatever this total is will be compared with the 83 million dollars, which is done by subtracting. We'll note the difference, revealing whether we are over or under the stated budget, then answer the question.

Clearly, this is more of a reading comprehension problem than a math problem. We can't even begin to solve this problem until we have a clear picture of the situation's logic and what's being asked of us, and that can only be captured if we read the problem correctly.

Now imagine a student who is brilliant in math, but new to this country. His English proficiency is very low. He cannot form a picture in his mind from the word problem itself, but if explained to him orally, he could accurately multiply the larger numbers and compare them with the $83 million budget, arriving at an accurate answer. The test format as it is does not allow him to reveal his true level of proficiency with the mathematical concept.

There are many students who don't speak the "language" of the assessments we give them: the highly interpersonal child asked to work alone for hours at a time, the writing/reading learning-disabled child asked to make sense of advanced text without any of his or her normal tools or strategies for success (a focusing T square, a graphic organizer, listening to the text on tape, being able to read the words aloud, using an AlphaSmart® to make a response, or being given an extended time period), the impoverished child asked to determine the appropriateness of a budget for an extended European vacation. With all three students, the teacher's assessments as stated will not result in an accurate rendering of mastery. Each student's performance will be distorted by the assessment format or approach. The grades earned are useless to the teacher and the student.

If a child doesn't write well, yet understands diffusion and the role it plays in animals and plants completely, why would we give an assessment that requires a written essay on diffusion and its roles in plants and animals? It would be more a test of essay construction than of diffusion. For those of us who cannot play the violin, we would be hard-pressed to express a novel's theme through a violin performance, yet this is very similar to what we are

asking students who can't write well to do when we assign thematic essays in content areas. As students, we would say the test is unfair. We'd claim that we knew the novel's theme, just couldn't get it across to the teacher. If we teachers, then, are assessing students' essay writing, then we use essays as assessments. If we are assessing something else, however, then we consider using an alternative format in lieu of the essay or, at the very least, in addition to it.

Let's be clear: Essays are excellent assessment tools and are worth assigning for their own sake because they teach students rhetoric and reasoning that transfer to many other subjects and to life. When it comes time to consider the accuracy of a grade, however, we must be sure that the assessment format reveals the truth about a student's proficiency. If not, it should be scrapped for something more accurate. With every assessment, we must consider what we are trying to test, find the most accurate way of revealing what students know. Anything else is subterfuge.

One alternative format that teachers often misuse as a way to differentiate assessment is artwork. They ask students to draw their personal responses or to do art-heavy projects such as travel brochures, maps, cartoons, posters, dioramas, pop-up books, mobiles, and sculpture. Interactive notebooks can entail major artistic efforts from students as well. Some teachers see these tasks as innovative and revealing of students' mastery.

While they can be helpful instructional strategies and revealing for some students, they are not so for many. When students with little or no art skill learn of these assignments, they wither. They spend the majority of their efforts on the artistic aspects while subordinating their exploration and expression of accurate mastery; the medium becomes a barrier to success. I've seen interactive notebooks, for example, that took students hours to generate, but the majority of the time was spent in detailing and coloring their illustrations, not processing the ideas themselves. Just as any of us would do, these students worry most about what they cannot do. If we want them to focus on the content and skills of the unit, why would we cause such angst or add to their workload?

Artistically portraying content is a powerful way to learn material and should be used regularly as a learning tool in the classroom. When it's time to grade a student's mastery of that same material, however, artistic proclivities or lack thereof will affect what he or she can portray. Heavily artistic projects used for final declarations of mastery should only be used with students who have developed art skills; otherwise, students who lack those skills will receive inaccurate grades. Artistic skills can include aesthetics, eye-hand coordination, spatial thinking, visual arts, and kinesthetics, among others. These are excellent tools for all of us to learn. That's just it, though—we're learning them, we haven't mastered them. That makes it difficult for some of us to use them when being evaluated. In a differentiated class, we may assign

art-laden processes to help students come to know material, but we rarely mandate that all students use art skills to demonstrate mastery.

Does this mean we don't grade our students' political cartoons? No. It means we teach them all cartooning skills to improve their competence, and we complement their demonstrations of proficiency with other assessments, such as written analyses and quizzes, and what they contribute orally.

6. Avoid allowing extra credit and bonus points.

"Mr. Terwilliger," David asked. "I didn't do so well on that written, political cartoon analysis. I need to do something to raise my grade. Could I do a poster or something on cartooning for extra credit?"

"Sorry, David," Mr. Terwilliger replies. "I'm not a fan of allowing students to do extra credit to boost their grades. You can't substitute posters and other things for most assignments because I give assignments with a specific purpose in mind. In this case, how does doing a poster on cartooning teach you to analyze political cartoons in writing, or prove that you can?"

David looks down, his face crumbling in early panic. "It doesn't," he laments.

"I tell you what," his teacher continues. "You can go back and redo the written analysis until you meet the high standard of excellence set for it. What do you say?"

David looks up, not appeased, but not completely lost. "I don't think I can do any better. I worked on that for a long time, and all I got was a D+. I don't know how to do it differently."

"Well, look at it as your first attempt. You have more feedback now. Let's take a look at what still needs improvement. I'll work with you as you rewrite. You'll get it."

David thought for a moment before speaking. "Okay, but I don't know how I'm going to do this and keep up with my regular work. I have a baseball tournament every night this week."

Mr. Terwilliger nodded. "It's not insurmountable. Let's see what we can work out."

Many teachers offer extra credit as a way for students to improve a low grade. They think it gives students hope, and if the student is willing to take the initiative to do something a little extra, he should be rewarded by the addition of more points or a raised grade.

Some teachers also offer extra credit as incentive to students to stretch themselves, pushing beyond the regular unit of study. They might announce to a class, "Anyone who wants to earn an extra twenty-five points can do so by analyzing the current political climate for environmental protection programs and compare it with the political climate for such programs in the mid-

1970s. What's changed, how are we affected today, and what is the likely climate for environmental protection programs twenty years from now?"

These seem relatively safe and routine strategies, but we need to be very careful with extra credit offers. Anything that has enough points attached to it to alter a grade's accuracy in terms of what students have mastered should be avoided. For example, if a student demonstrates a C level of mastery, he or she shouldn't be given an opportunity to artificially inflate that grade with other work that doesn't hold him or her accountable for the same benchmarks or learning outcomes as the original assignment. Substituting a poster for an essay, for example, wouldn't cut it if teaching essay writing. Life science teacher Shah says it well: "How can you do the extra when you haven't done the regular?"

On the other hand, if the teacher is simply looking for a way for a student to express what she knows about pinocytosis, it doesn't matter what test format is used. In another example—conducting a real interview with an adult expert in the field of study, the student would not adequately apply the same skills and content by summarizing an interview news show, mentoring others in interviewing techniques, or creating a library display or PowerPoint presentation on interviewing skills. If we're assessing interview skills, she conducts an interview, and with the student, we analyze it and eventually evaluate her proficiency with interviewing others.

Though we might consider alternative routes to demonstrate mastery as we first design our unit, the choices for the final offering are made after serious contemplation. There is a purpose to each one. If a student can muster an alternative assignment that accounts for everything we are seeking, we can give that alternative serious consideration.

Bonus points on tests call for the same caution. If the student falters in his or her demonstration of mastery with the regular test items, but overcomes those scoring losses with points from a bonus section, then we have to reconsider whether the new, bonus-inflated grade really represents what the student knows and is able to do. This is especially a concern if the bonus questions or prompts are unrelated to the test's topic, such as the spurious bonus questions used by some teachers: "What's Mr. Terwilliger's favorite sport?" or "What famous person died on this day in 1989?" or "What was the score of last night's Orioles game?" or "Who's buried in Grant's tomb?"

If the bonus problems allow students to demonstrate the content and skill proficiencies required in the regular test items, then it's probably okay to use the bonus-inflated grade, but it begs two questions: If the bonus questions require the same skills and content as the regular items, then why are they not a part of the main body of the test? And, if the student can respond to the bonus questions that require the same skills and content proficiency as the regular test items, why couldn't he or she do the regular ones to show proficiency?

To offer extra credit as a way to compel students to push themselves is okay in most situations, within limits. If we find students getting interested and pushing themselves only when the extra credit options are offered, however, we may need to rethink our lesson plans. Students should be challenged and stretched by the regular lessons, not just the extra credit experiences. We need to keep our minds open to the possibility that advanced students need to have a higher operating level in most of their work, not just the occasional extra credit opportunity. If we find students progressing only during enrichment or advanced, extra credit experiences, let's meet those students' needs by turning those types of extra credit experiences into the standard operating procedure for them every day.

Are there times when bribing students with extra credit might be okay? Sure. If we live near Washington, D.C., for example, and the Smithsonian Institute announces that one evening next week an archeologist who has just returned from doing field research is going to hold a seminar and announce a major new find, we entice students to attend the briefing at the Baird Auditorium at the National Museum of Natural History and report back on the exciting new discoveries. We promise things like, "I'll make it worth your while in the gradebook." This may only mean turning one or two zeros in the homework column into checks, but students are a bit more interested in pursuing the extra credit experience and it doesn't affect a grade's overall accuracy.

Educator Chris Toy offers an idea that seems to be a sensible way to offer extra credit while also keeping the grade accurate:

> *Our math teachers use the method of having the highest grade for the basic assignment be ninety-eight points, or an A. Challenge points go to students who extend their work above and beyond the basic project. What is needed for challenge points is well defined by the teachers ahead of time. Challenge points are available to every student on every graded assignment, including homework. It's interesting to see the cross section of students who make the attempt. It's not always the best and the brightest.*

Science teacher, Bobby Biddle, says:

> *I don't allow students to come up to me and ask for extra credit opportunities, but I'll put extra credit opportunities on tests and assignments here and there, usually about something challenging, just enough to be motivating, but not distort the grade. Of course, when Duke beats North Carolina, I put one extra point on every student's test automatically.*

Biddle has also been known to use extra credit to substitute for a student's lowest grade. "Every kid can have a bad day," she says.

Susan Clark, an English teacher at the same school, gives extra credit via books with higher Lexile numbers (see www.lexile.com for many of such books):

> *Students have to read a certain number of pages per week. We have the Lexile numbers for each book. Lexile numbers indicate the challenge level of the reading. If students read books with higher Lexile numbers indicating greater challenge, they get more points for reading the book.*

7. Avoid group grades.

Many of us from time to time have done something similar to this: We've told students in groups that we will select one notebook from each group at random and grade it. Every group member will get the same grade for their own notebook as the one representative notebook earns. We then give the group time to compare notes and get everyone's notebook up to speed so that whichever one we choose, the group will look good.

Pretty reasonable, right? Maybe not. What does that grade tell us about any one of the students in that group? Little to nothing. How does that grade guide our next steps? It doesn't; it's not an assessment.

Most teachers consider it unfair to give entire groups of students the same grade based on one group member's performance or on the whole group's performance on a task. This makes sense. Grades that are given to whole groups like this don't reflect an individual student's achievement or growth, and therefore can't be used to document progress, provide feedback, or inform instructional decisions. Group grades are often a form of coercion used by teachers to compel students to work with members of their groups to learn the material, at least superficially. Since they are not accurate indicators of mastery on the part of any one student, and that's what grades are supposed to be, they undermine the legitimate use of grades.

In addition, group grades tend to create unhealthy peer pressure among classmates, often generating negative feelings toward immature and/or unmotivated members of the group who did not work as much as others, or who had trouble achieving to the same level. Some students can glide through a group task doing little or no work, but earning the same high mark as those who did all the work and made the group score well. For the ill will they often engender and the antithesis of grades and learning they promote, group grades are wisely left off the differentiating teacher's menu of best practices.

Does this mean cooperative learning activities are inappropriate? No. Cooperative learning is an outstanding teaching strategy. When we use it with our students, however, we're mindful that it is a technique used to teach students about a topic, not a demonstration of proficiency in that topic itself.

For one reason or another, we may assign grades to a cooperative learning product and everyone in the group gets the same grade. That doesn't mean the grade has to be fully influential in the end of the grading period declaration of mastery, however. We can use the grade as a minor feedback or documentation symbol in the moment of the lesson, but the discerning teacher takes time after the lesson to decide whether the grade earned in the cooperative learning task was a grade indicating mastery of the topic being studied or of proficiency with the cooperative learning process. If it's associated more with the process, we drop the grade's influence on the final grade because it is not a statement of mastery. With cooperative groups, we strive to grade students individually, and we set up the positive interdependence such that no student receives a lower grade for another student's lack of achievement.

8. Avoid grading on a curve.

Grading on a curve means that the teacher gathers everyone's scores on a given assessment, then arbitrarily sets a cut-off for the number of each letter grade to be dispensed for that assessment. For example, in a class of thirty-two students, the top five scores, whatever they are, might earn an A, even if they are in the 80 percent zone. The next ten grades below that are reserved for all B grades; the next ten for all C grades; the next five for the D grades; and the last two, whatever they are, for the F grades. Moving left to right, from lowest to highest grade, that makes a pretty nice, positively skewed, bell curve—2, 5, 10, 10, 5. We can rest easy that we've done our job when we get such a nice grade distribution, right?

Criterion referenced vs. norm referenced

No. Grades that are used for documenting progress, providing feedback, and guiding instructional decisions are criterion-referenced. That is, they are based on the student's demonstrations of knowledge and skill scored against a set of established criteria. The students' achievement is put in terms of mastery of standards. Norm-referenced grading is comparing students against others in their grade level or age group. There's no reference to mastery; it's about standings, not standards.

Grading on a curve is extremely distorting as a reference of mastery. A student can achieve a 70 percent mastery rating, for example, but get an A because his or her score is among the top three scores of the class. In terms of mastery, however, he or she is a D student if 70 percent is a D on our school's grading scale. This kind of grade yields nothing useful to the modern, highly accomplished differentiating teacher. All we can conclude from such grading is that some students do less well than others. There's nothing in that statement that helps provide feedback to specific students nor decide where to go next in the lesson on the Cartesian plane.

Guskey reminds us that grading on a curve also moves us farther away from one of our teaching goals—collaboration. He writes that grading on a curve

> *. . . makes learning a highly competitive activity in which students compete against one another for the few scarce rewards (high grades) distributed by the teacher. Under these conditions, students readily see that helping others become successful threatens their own chances. (Guskey and Bailey 2001, pp. 36–37)*

He furthers his argument by quoting from Johnson and Toauer (1989) who found grading on a curve to mean the following:

> *High grades are attained not through excellence in performance but simply by doing better than one's classmates. As a result, learning becomes a game of winners and losers, and because the number of rewards kept are arbitrarily small, most students are forced to be losers. . . . (Guskey and Bailey 2001)*

To be honest, I almost did not mention grading on a curve in this book. It is slipping from our lexicon in most school districts, for it seems to be an obsolete practice indicative of less enlightened times. We've progressed as a profession, or so I thought. In fact, some new teachers have to ask what we mean when we mention curve grading in conversation.

Unfortunately, several universities, including a few ivy-league schools that set much of the tone for academics in America, have departments that recently reinstituted grading on a curve. They claim they need to sort students, increase their dedication to studies, and create more accountability. Grading on a curve does the first of these inappropriately, and it does neither of the remaining two. Universities should reverse their decisions to allow grading on a curve.

9. Avoid recording zeros for work not done.

Zeros skew the grade to a point where its accuracy is distorted. Teachers using the 100-point scale who do not replace a zero with a fifty, sixty, or seventy to equalize the influence of all grades earned end up recording inaccurate grades. This is true even when students do less than the upper-F level, too. Once a student has crossed over into "failure," delineating degrees of failure doesn't help anyone, and it lessens the usefulness of the grade. This is controversial for most teachers, however. A more detailed rationale is presented in the section in Chapter 11 entitled "Record a Zero or a Sixty?"

10. Avoid using norm-referenced terms to describe criterion-referenced attributes.

If grades are standards-based, reporting what students know and are able to do, they declare mastery of a student's learning, not how he or she is doing in

relation to others, such as we would get when talking about a student being average or not. The use of mastery criteria to identify relative "averageness" makes no sense in the standards-based classroom. For more on this, see the discussion of grade definitions in Chapter 7.