

HANDOUT #2

Arriving at Letter Grades: Get Closer to the Learning

Excerpted from the article by Caren Cameron and Kathleen Gregory

“I’ve collected lots of information on students, but I don’t know how to put it all together into a letter grade. I’ve got test scores, project marks, percentages, rubric scales 1-2-3, checks and pluses and minuses, self and peer assessments, checklists, comments, my observations, homework scores, portfolios, journals... and more!! I know we are supposed to be giving letter grades that are criterion-referenced, but I am not exactly sure what that means either. How can I take all of this information and come up with a single letter grade?”

Many of our conversations for the last decade have included questions about reporting such as: What gets added in? Does effort count? What do you do when students don’t hand work in on time? What does an A mean anyway?

In this article we offer a five - step approach to arriving at letter grades. It involves a shift from totalling up a list of marks to matching evidence of learning with descriptions of achievement. This approach allows us to use a wide range of evidence and to translate this into a criterion-referenced grade based on prescribed outcomes. This approach moves letter grades a step closer to the learning.

Step one:

Look at your curriculum requirements (content standards, outcomes, documents, IRPs, guidebooks) and determine the three to five big, overriding ideas that you are required to teach in your subject area.

For example: Math – Gr. 7
Students will...

- know computational skills/ concepts (angles, area, etc.)
- use different strategies and approaches to solve tasks (how students approach mathematical tasks e.g. do they do so independently, what varied strategies do they use, do they reflect to tell when they are on or off track, do they seek support if they need it, do they use manipulatives as a strategy, etc.)
- see patterns, relationships and relevance (students see and use patterns, interpret them, describe and explain)
- communicate / explain and show what they know using materials, math symbols and terms (can explain how they arrived at answers, show, represent and use terms correctly, use symbols correctly)
- show a mathematical attitude (take risks, tolerate ambiguity, persevere with short term tasks as well as open-ended, complex tasks; are self-motivated to figure out an answer)

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Step two:

Record these big ideas on the left hand side on a piece of paper. Then, write three levels of descriptions for each big idea. (See Figure 1 Achievement Grid)

Words that describe frequency (consistently usually occasionally) and level of support (independently, with some support, with regular or one-on-one support) can often show distinctions between levels. These descriptions of performance will show a range of performance from satisfactory (C) to excellent (A) performance.

Step three:

For each big idea, decide what assessment information you will be collecting as evidence for the learning. This information may be from observing students, from students' work products and from conversations with students. Record the specific type of evidence you will be using on the achievement grid.

(see Figure 1 - possibilities of what "evidence" could look like for each big idea).

Step four:

Look at your assessment information (evidence) for each student's performance to get an overall picture. Then MATCH-- rather than add up- the

assessment information with the description that is the closest "fit" for each big idea. Circle or highlight one of these descriptions for each big idea.

Step five:

From the patterns / trends that are shown on the achievement grid, determine which grade to assign. Some patterns are very clear and indicate an obvious letter grade. Other performances are "all over the grid." In this case, teachers use their own professional judgment to determine, in relation to the outcomes, the letter grade that reflects the most consistent pattern of student achievement.

QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES

Q: We have to give percentages – How can that work with this process?

R: One way teachers deal with percentages is to arrive at a letter grade FIRST and then decide on the percentage. For example, look at the range of the percent for an A letter grade (86 – 100%) and decide on a "low" (86 - 89%) a "mid" (90 – 95%) or "high" (96 – 100%) percentage range.

Again, teachers use the assessment information and their professional judgment to decide if the student's performance is in the high, middle or low portion of the range.

Rarely do people question whether percentage scores truly represent student learning. They simply assume the scores are an accurate reflection of students' understanding and performance. Teachers do not determine whether the differences between the percentage scores of 70 to 75 represents the same difference in achievement indicated by the difference between 90 and 95. To coin a phrase, teacher judgment is replaced by the 'power of the points'. Marzano p. 86

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Q: Isn't this approach very subjective?

R: All assessment and evaluation is subjective to some degree. To help us be as accurate as possible, we find that it is important to include observations, student products and conversations as evidence of learning in relation to

standards (outcomes). When we look at these multiple measures of students' performance, these three perspectives help us find an "approximation of reality." Whether we like it or not, assessment and evaluation is still "a complex process of human judgment." Sutton p. 10

No assessment or evaluation technique is capable of offering absolute truth. Standardized test scores, teacher observations, teacher or self ratings – even simple checklists are, at best, approximations of reality and must be interpreted cautiously and within the context of the teacher's experience and knowledge about the individual student and the learning situation. Jeroski, p. 33.

Q: My biggest question is how can I justify my letter grades to parents?

What we have found is that most parents want to know the grade and also, what needs to be improved (What does he/she need to work on at home?) The description of the letter grades links the letter grades to the learning and parents can see exactly what their son/daughter needs to do to obtain a higher grade. We also find that when our students have been involved in the assessment process by talking with their parents about their learning and showing evidence of their learning and progress during a conference, we rarely are asked to justify letter grades to these parents.

Q: Our electronic grade book program requires a percentage and then we fit numbers into each of the bins and weight each assignment. What can we do?

We recognize how seductive technology can be to both educators and parents; it gives off the aura of accurate, clean, complete and unquestionable information on achievement. It can also hide the complexity of assessment and learning which is often messy, non-linear and ambiguous. We find that as we move towards using standards-based letter grades, we have a great deal of evidence that does not 'fit' into a numerical form and we no longer feel comfortable inputting numbers, weighting them and accepting the resulting grade (computed electronically) as an accurate reporting of students' performance. We want to have a valid picture of student achievement – one that recognizes all aspects of student performance. We adapt the technology so it is useful for us and supports us in tracking the evidence we collect.

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Above all, we have to recognize that teachers' professional judgments will always be an essential part of the grading process. Teachers at all levels must make carefully reasoned decisions about the purpose of the grade, the components that will be included in determining the grade, how those components will be combined and summarized and what format will be used in reporting those summaries...In the end, teachers must still decide what grade offers the most accurate and fairest description of each student's achievement and level of performance over a particular period. Gusky p. 111.

Computerized grading programs and electronic gradebooks yield neither greater objectivity nor enhanced fairness. At best, they offer a tool for manipulating data....they do not lessen the challenge involved in assigning grades that accurately and fairly reflect students' achievement and level of performance. Gusky p. 107

References:

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