



GRADING

SMARTER

NOT HARDER

Assessment Strategies
That Motivate Kids
and Help Them Learn

MYRON DUECK

Foreword by Ken O'Connor



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MYRON DUECK



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PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-4166-1890-4 ASCD product # 114003 8A/14
 Quantity discounts: 10–49, 10%; 50+, 15%; 1,000+, special discounts (e-mail programteam@ascd.org or call 800-933-2723, ext. 5634, or 703-575-5634). Also available in e-book formats. For desk copies, go to www.ascd.org/deskcopy.

ASCD Member Book No. FY14-8A (July 2014 PSI+). ASCD Member Books mail to Premium (P), Select (S), and Institutional Plus (I+) members on this schedule: Jan, PSI+; Feb, P; Apr, PSI+; May, P; Jul, PSI+; Aug, P; Sep, PSI+; Nov, PSI+; Dec, P. For current details on membership, see www.ascd.org/membership.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Dueck, Myron.
 Grading smarter, not harder : assessment strategies that motivate kids and help them learn / Myron Dueck.
 pages cm.
 Includes bibliographical references and index.
 ISBN 978-1-4166-1890-4 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Educational tests and measurements—United States.
 2. Grading and marking (Students)—United States. 3. Educational evaluation—United States. I. Title.
 LB3051.D668 2014
 371.26—dc23

2014009519

23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

GRADING SMARTER NOT HARDER

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*To Elijah and Sloane—keep learning, keep exploring.
In memory of Diane.*

For Translation Review

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing a book was more of a challenge than I could have ever imagined. Though the process takes hundreds of hours spent in quiet contemplation, much of the final product is due to the contributions and guidance of others. It is with incredible gratitude that I take the time to acknowledge them here.

Students: Students have provided me with invaluable feedback and the opportunity to continue my quest to be a better educator. I thank you for your honesty, your criticism, and your willingness to try something new; without you, none of my work would have mattered at all. I am especially grateful to the at-risk learners—many of whom I mention in this book—who, despite feeling vulnerable, take on the challenge of learning.

Educators: The tough questions provided by educators have undoubtedly helped me to better understand and articulate the complexities,

challenges, and solutions related to grading and assessment. A special thanks to those educators in both Canada and the United States who contributed templates or ideas discussed in this book: Ben Arcuri, Shona Becker, Chris Bradley, Scott Harkness, Karl Koehler, Cindy Postlethwaite, Russ Reid, Doug Scotchburn, Naryn Searcy, Chris Terris, Geoff Waterman, and Lisa West. Over the past seven years, School District 67 in British Columbia has provided me a wealth of opportunities, and I am very fortunate to have such incredible colleagues.

Assessment Leaders: A number of people have been instrumental to my grading and assessment journey. Ken O'Connor—you have provided the solutions to the problem of broken grades and paved the way to amassing credible data related to standards-based assessment; thank you for being a friend, mentor, and sounding board for me on many occasions. Your willingness to write the foreword to this book leaves me indebted. Rick Stiggins—you are an assessment icon and you have established the benchmark for continuing the conversation on grading and assessment. Jan Chappuis, Jacob Bruno, and the rest of the Assessment Training Institute team—your conferences and training have provided a stage upon which educators can continually hold meaningful discussions on grading and assessment. Tom Schimmer—you played an absolutely critical role in starting me down the path toward sound assessment, and your suggestion that I write down the feedback from my students was arguably the best advice I ever received. Without your leadership at Princess Margaret and your willingness to engage in tough conversations, I just can't see how I would have ventured this deep into the assessment conversation. If your challenge to other educators is as effective for them as it was for me, your impact on assessment will be global.

School Leaders: Bill Bidlake—thank you for providing opportunity and support for educators willing to take risks. Terry Grady and Don MacIntyre—thank you for being incredible mentors and for providing

a venue for my comments when I felt most frustrated. Wendy Hyer—thanks for the professional and personal support in my growth as a leader both inside and beyond our school district.

Book Production: Dianne Hildebrand—you taught me English in 12th grade, and who would have thought you would come to my rescue in the process of editing my book? Genny Ostertag and Ernesto Yermoli at ASCD—I couldn't have asked for better people to guide me through my first book. Your feedback and direction are what made this book go from a collection of thoughts to a finished product—thank you!

Friends: Chris Van Bergeyk and Todd Manuel—your constant moral support, questions, and thoughts through the writing of this book were more helpful than you realize. Russ Reid and Cindy Postlethwaite—thank you for being the two teachers to whom I could run for reassurance when I needed it most. Jeremy Hiebert—thanks for reminding me that a mountain bike ride makes for a great educational conversation. Ben Arcuri—your unabashed honesty and eye for criticism has kept me on track many times. Thanks for the support and your authentic approach to educational confrontation. You personify the saying, “Growth comes from being surrounded by critical friends.”

Family: Diane—thank you for showing me that the value of taking on a challenge is not measured by win or loss, but by the way in which we tackle it. You were one of my strongest supporters, and I wish I could have shared the completion of this project with you. Ben—thanks for mentoring me on divergent thinking and looking at situations from an angle not yet considered. Dad—thanks for decades of instilling in me the belief that no problem is without a solution. Mom—thanks for showing me how to care for others, and also for the piano lessons; I am now able to sit and work for hours even though I would rather be doing something else. Kev—thanks for a lifetime of fun, debate,

reflection, and challenges. And finally, Tracey, Elijah, and Sloane—you provide me with ample support and honest feedback, and for that I am eternally grateful. Elijah and Sloane, you have taught me much about different learning characteristics, as well as what works and what doesn't when it comes to motivation and consequences. Thank you for being both understanding and patient while “Daddy works on his book.” Tracey, I do not have enough words to express my thanks. This assessment journey is not what you signed up for, but your never-ending support has made it so much easier. Thank you for being my partner and friend.

For Translation Review

FOREWORD

Have you read books that made you both laugh and cry? How often can you say this about a book on assessment and grading? My guess is that for most educators, the answer is along the following lines: “You have to be joking—assessment and grading are serious aspects of teaching and learning. Books on those topics affect me professionally and intellectually, not emotionally.” But professional content that affects us emotionally provides us with a deeper sense of connection to it and is far more likely to have a positive influence on our professional beliefs and practices.

This book made me both laugh and cry. I wish I had been able to read it 47 years ago, before I began my first year of teaching. The stories Myron tells about teachers and students speak powerfully both to the positive effects that assessment and grading can have when they are done well and to the negative effects that ensue when they are done

badly. Sadly, the latter is true for most traditional approaches to assessment and grading.

In many ways, Myron's path reflects my own journey from rookie teacher to classroom veteran to consultant on assessment and grading. Fortunately for Myron and his students, his epiphanies and resulting changes to practice have happened while he is still in the classroom; unfortunately for me and my students, most of my epiphanies happened after I had left the classroom. Please don't get the wrong idea—I believe that I was a good teacher most of the time, but thanks more to an intuitive sense of what's good teaching and what's good for learning than to any teacher preparation program or professional development course. As I see it, one of the biggest problems with teacher education programs is the lack of courses on assessment and grading. Even when such courses are available, they are often not required for graduation and they rarely include any information about grading. Until recently, the same has been true of most in-service professional development offerings. In either a preparatory or professional-development context, *Grading Smarter, Not Harder* should be required reading. Not only is it well referenced and research based, it is also fun to read and practical.

Myron makes it clear that the journey to productive assessment and grading is not easy and sometimes involves missteps, so teachers should have the confidence to go outside their comfort zone to make changes that are good for students. As Myron makes clear in this book, changes need to be good not only for all learners, but for teachers as well.

Grading Smarter, Not Harder allows teachers to reflect on their own successes and failures and to understand the solutions that Myron suggests. There is so much good advice in this book that I am not going to try to summarize the whole thing, but I will identify four key lessons that stood out for me:

- 1. Teachers should grade smarter, not harder.** Though teachers frequently complain that student-centered assessment for learning places unreasonable demands on their time, Myron

points out that by working smarter, teachers can actually diminish their workloads.

- 2. We are often better coaches than teachers.** Myron discusses the importance of applying coaching skills learned on the playing field to the classroom. When I coached field hockey, I looked for things I could do that would move us to the next level of performance—in effect, assessment of learning.
- 3. Learning is more important than grades.** Traditional practice is to grade everything students do regardless of its purpose. As Myron points out, if we organize our lessons according to learning goals and identify clear levels of performance, the focus remains on learning; advice on how to improve naturally follows.
- 4. Relationships are crucial.** As Myron notes, changes to assessment practice can affect not only the relationships among teachers and students, but also those among students and parents and students and their peers. Positive relationships are the sine qua non for success in teaching and learning.

Myron is a valued personal and professional friend, so I was pleased and honored when he asked me to write the foreword for this book. It has been an absolute joy to watch him progress from a participant at ATI conferences in Portland to a presenter at those conferences and at other places around the world. I am so glad that Myron wrote this book because now an even wider audience will be able to benefit from his journey and the wise advice that he gives. Thank you, Myron.

Ken O'Connor
Scarborough (not Toronto), Ontario
February 2014

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INTRODUCTION

At the early age of 19, my dad was given control of a house-moving crew by his father. He went on to spend over 20 years figuring out how to move structures from one place to another. The process of moving buildings does not lend itself to standardization: invariably, each move involves many unforeseen challenges that must be surmounted before a structure can be trundled down the road—if there *is* a road, and sometimes there isn't. Dueck Building Movers has transported dwellings across frozen lakes in the winter and by barge in the summer.

Often, my dad would agree to a project first and figure out the logistics later—clearly, he was a problem solver. Thanks to my dad's influence, I grew up knowing that “it won't work” was never an adequate response to a situation if all avenues hadn't first been thoroughly explored. This mind-set proved helpful when I first encountered the concepts of sound grading practices and assessment for learning

(AFL). Many of my colleagues voiced their concerns about these new approaches:

- “The ideas will never work in content-heavy high school courses.”
- “I would never try these reckless changes in courses that have mandated standardized exams.”
- “Getting rid of late penalties and zeros will result in a slide toward irresponsibility and chaos.”

Despite the warnings, I forged ahead with changing some of the grading and assessment routines in my class. Initially, I found these shifts daunting and was tempted to return to more familiar assessment methods. But I stuck with the changes, and—like my father—solved any problems as they arose. Six years later, I have revolutionized the way I collect, tabulate, and present the grades of my students. I have also incorporated assessment routines that promote learning rather than merely (and inaccurately) measure it. Instead of sliding into the inevitable chaos that so many people predicted, I have found the following to be true:

- My students’ scores on government-mandated tests have steadily risen.
- My students’ grades more accurately reflect their understanding of government-mandated learning outcomes.
- My students feel more connected to the grading and assessment systems in my classroom.
- My grading techniques are fairer and more equitable than before.
- I have formed stronger, more sustainable relationships with my students.
- Students exhibit a heightened level of ownership, responsibility, and accountability in my classes.
- I have been able to explore more effective interventions for at-risk students than before.

We replicate the systems from which we advance, which is arguably the biggest reason why schools continue to keep one foot entrenched in the Industrial Age. Virtually any staffwide conversation on student grading includes arguments for enforcing rigor, responsibility, and hard work. Missing assignments receive no credit because “nothing equals zero” and mistakes are met with penalties. Support for maintaining a school’s traditional grading and assessment policies may be as deeply rooted as the trees on school grounds. Changes to allow for retesting are met with particular resistance, with many educators firm in their belief that “students should get it right the first time” and teachers who re-assess students often seen as “soft.”

Fortunately, teachers who embrace a more personalized approach to assessment have plenty of support. In his book *World Class Learners* (2012), Yong Zhao compares traditional education systems to sausage making, noting that we have taken individual interests, goals, and attributes and dumped them all in the same grinder (school system) to churn out identical sausages (students). Though we may have needed a lot of uniformly educated workers back in the Industrial Age, this is no longer the case. In a recent interview with *The New York Times*, Laszlo Bock, senior vice president for operations at Google, made this point plainly:

One of the things we’ve seen from all our data crunching is that GPAs are worthless as criteria for hiring, and test scores are worthless. . . .

After two or three years, your ability to perform at Google is completely unrelated to how you performed when you were in school. . . . You want people who like figuring out stuff where there is no obvious answer. (Bryant, 2013)

Even those at the very top of our educational and innovative food chain recognize that the landscape has shifted away from task-oriented information processing. Lawrence Summers, the former president of Harvard University, says that “increasingly, anything you learn is going to become obsolete within a decade and so the most important kind

of learning is about how to learn” (Bradshaw, 2012). There is ample support outside of K–12 schools for changing the traditional model of education, but change does not come easy.

The Process

This book is a detailed account of how and why I came to change my approach to grading and assessing students. Once I felt confident that the changes I had introduced were effective, I shared some of them with colleagues, many of whom were quick to inform me that there were no second chances in the “real world” and that my acceptance of retesting would hurt students and the community. Other educators challenged my decision to stop grading uniform homework assignments; they were convinced that students simply wouldn’t do ungraded homework. However, as nebulous speculation gave way to concrete student accounts of success, it became increasingly difficult for anyone to discount the effectiveness of my approach. Students were gaining more confidence, and at-risk learners were passing courses in which the grading was outcome-based.

Decades of research point to indisputable evidence that grading penalties are far less effective than feedback and personalized learning. Responsive teaching has always reacted to the needs of learners over the agendas of teachers: it is less about delivering a grade than about delivering timely, accurate, and specific feedback (Reeves, 2010).

As I developed my new approach to grading and assessment, two items in particular influenced me greatly: Ken O’Connor’s *A Repair Kit for Grading: 15 Fixes for Broken Grades* (2010), which challenged me to examine the methods by which I graded my students and the extent to which my routines measured student learning; and Rick Stiggins’s three essential questions that students should always be able to answer (Where am I going? Where am I now? How can I close the gap?; Chappuis and colleagues, 2012).

Effect on Learners

If my father's experiences as a building mover influenced me when I first tackled changes to grading and assessment, my mother's experiences as a nurse seem to influence me more six years later. At her job, my mom formed relationships that were strengthened by the fact that everyone involved wanted to do well, feel well, and better themselves. People want to feel a sense of confidence—both in themselves and in the systems upon which they rely. The reality is that some people need help attaining this.

Confidence is critical to learning, and my students have demonstrated an increase in confidence since I started making changes. They now feel empowered by the opportunity to meaningfully engage in their own learning and improve as lifelong learners. All educators can personalize learning and see the power of increased student confidence, but we need concrete examples of and structures for how best to achieve this. In this book you'll find a number of strategies that have increased student confidence in my classroom.

In addition to grading and assessment routines, it is important for teachers to be aware of socioeconomic issues affecting students. My mom's work as a nurse involved caring for the disadvantaged and extending extra assistance to those who most needed it—actions that influenced me when, as a teacher, I noticed how much greater obstacles to learning were for students living with poverty than for their affluent peers. The unmistakable effects of poverty on student achievement are a grading issue: although some students are at a greater disadvantage than others, we tend to grade all our students using the same criteria. This approach too often deepens the academic frustration of at-risk learners and gravely misrepresents the extent to which these students understand the content. It's been my experience that alternative approaches to grading, testing, and homework can actually improve the academic standing and disposition of impoverished students. The

same is true for students who are under immense pressure to excel: when the window through which such students can demonstrate their skills widens, anxiety subsides and accountability increases.

Criteria for Punitive Action: The CARE Guidelines

I have developed what I call the CARE guidelines—four requirements that must be met before I apply classroom penalties to students:

- **Care:** The student must *care* about the consequences of the penalty.
- **Aims:** The results of the penalty must complement my overall *aims* as a teacher.
- **Reduction:** The penalty must result in a *reduction* of the negative behavior.
- **Empowerment:** The student must feel *empowered* regarding the actions for which he or she is being penalized.

These four conditions have fundamentally altered the way I mete out penalties in school.

A Leap of Faith

One of my favorite movie scenes of all time is found in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. Near the end of the film, Indiana Jones is faced with the last of three challenges: the leap of faith. As he stands at the edge of a deep chasm, he is forced to step forward to what appears to be a certain death. Indiana Jones closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and steps forward—only to find that he is stepping onto a bridge that he had been unable to see. Over the past six years, I've had to take many of my own leaps of faith, stepping away from the familiar and toward the uncertain. I had to trust the research that supported the changes I was making and have the courage to question my own long-held beliefs. And unlike Indiana Jones, I had the luxury of simply

returning back to what I had been doing before if my changes didn't work out.

I suggest that the uncertain reader take a path similar to mine. Try one thing from this book that appears to have merit. Adapt it to suit the grade level and subject you are teaching. Inform your students of the new process and let them know that you are as much a learner in the process as they are. Finally, with an honest and open frame of mind, observe the effects that the change has on your class. If the change works, keep doing it and consider trying something else as well. Write down your experiences and note the feedback you receive from students. Who knows? You might write a book about it one day.

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GRADING

Imagine you're a student on the first day of class. In reviewing the class norms and expectations, your teacher addresses the issue of bathroom breaks as follows:

Although we all know you should use the bathroom during your break so that you don't interrupt my teaching or your learning, you will each receive five tokens that you can use throughout the semester whenever "nature calls" during class. Once you have exhausted your five tokens, you will be deducted 1 percent of your grade at the end of the course for each additional time that you use the bathroom during class. Because I believe in fairness, the converse will be true as well: for every token you have left over at the end of the course, I will add 1 percent to your final grade.

I hope that very few educators would agree that bathroom visits should be tied to measures of learning outcomes! An online search for "frequent urination" should convince even the most steadfast supporter of

this token system that someone who needs to use the bathroom frequently is probably not doing so by choice. Pregnancy, bladder infection, stress, diabetes, and a host of other conditions can cause someone to have to urinate frequently.

To what extent do members of the educational community introduce nonacademic variables into the grading of student learning? How many of these variables lie outside of students' direct control? These two questions will help guide the conversation in this chapter.

Behaviors Versus Academics

Let's examine some hypothetical scenarios that involve missing student assignments. For each scenario, let's assume we know the intricate details of each student's experience and ability.

Scenario 1: Tim is walking to school with a completed science assignment safely secured in his backpack when a thief suddenly accosts him and forces him to surrender his backpack. Is the fact that Tim arrives at school without his homework a measure of his learning or ability? Clearly, the answer is no. If any measure were to be applied here, it would be of his bad luck or poor choice of school route.

Scenario 2: Sally chooses not to bother even starting her science assignment, though she's a very capable student and would likely do well on it. In this instance, is the absence of an assignment a measure of learning or ability? Again, the answer would be no: because Sally did not complete it, her teacher can't measure its merit. If any measure were to be applied here, it would be of her stubbornness or poor decision making.

Scenario 3: Lee is new to his school, having moved into town with his family a few months ago. He struggles with his English speaking and writing skills. He has no friends at school and remains very quiet in class, sitting by himself and seldom asking for help. Though he misses the due date for his science assignment, his teacher can't determine

whether or not he is able to complete it because he is so quiet. The fact is that Lee, uncertain of his ability to complete the assignment, never even starts it. His weak English skills make it hard for him to convey what little understanding he has on the subject. Is Lee's lack of work a measure of learning or ability? Although his choice not even to try completing the assignment is a behavioral decision, it is partly due to a lack of linguistic confidence and a fear of failure. An academic measure might be applied in this case, but determining it would be very difficult.

Scenario 4: Clark tries to complete his science assignment but gives up in frustration. He crumples it up and throws it in the garbage. When his mom demands that he take the assignment out of the trash and complete it, Clark dumps her coffee on it, slams the front door, and goes off to hang out with his buddies at the skate park. Although this scenario is the closest to allowing for a measure of academic ability, there is no evidence available of Clark's level of understanding, and it is unlikely that anyone is willing to sift through the city landfill to find it.

I decided a few years ago that I would only measure hard evidence of the extent to which students understood and could meet established learning goals. To be clear, the behaviors my students exhibit in class and throughout the school are very important to me. As educators, we must preserve and guard our role in forming and encouraging positive behaviors among young people. That said, I have chosen to make every attempt to avoid factoring student behaviors into my grading unless I am explicitly asked to do so by prescribed learning outcomes. Fairly applied, this approach must go both ways: if we decide not to penalize students for negative behaviors, then conversely we should not inflate grades on account of positive ones.

Ultimately, behaviors will factor into grading whether or not we explicitly attempt to measure them. Students who show up to class on time, arrive with the necessary materials, attempt to complete their homework, and treat others nicely will likely benefit

academically—just as students who make poor decisions will suffer academically. If teachers make every effort to collect evidence of learning and measure this alone, behaviors will result in their logical consequences. As my friend and colleague Chris Terris put it, “I care far more about my son’s behavior indicators than I do about his academic grade; if he is trying hard, paying attention, and doing what he is supposed to, his grade will fall where it belongs.”

“Lates” and Zeros

When addressing punitive grading measures in this chapter, I will be speaking mainly of *deductions for late assignments* (“lates”) and *zeros*. Any discussion of zeros must include a distinction between a 4-point scale and 100-point scale. Doug Reeves (2010) explains the difference very well:

On a four-point scale, where “A” = “4,” “B” = “3,” and so on, the zero is accurate, because the difference between the “A,” “B,” “C,” “D,” and “F” are all equal—one point. But assigning a zero on a 100-point scale is a math error; it implies a 60-point difference between the “D” and “F,” while the other differences are typically about 10 points. It makes missing a single assignment the “academic death penalty.” It’s not just unfair—it is not mathematically accurate. (p. 78)

The majority of the zeros I see getting handed out are on a 100-point scale. Both lates and zeros are attempts to affect behavior by statistically incorporating punitive measures into the grading scheme.

Here are some examples of how lates and zeros are typically used in grading decisions:

- 10 percent of the grade is deducted per day after the assignment’s due date.
- A 50 percent deduction is applied to the assignment following an arbitrary number of days beyond the original due date.

- After the due date, the assignment is graded on a pass/fail basis; if awarded a “pass,” 50 percent of the grade is still deducted.
- If the assignment is not handed in by the due date, it receives an automatic zero.

Other grading schemes incorporate penalties in less obvious ways.

Here are a few such examples I have encountered:

- A teacher gives a quiz as soon as class begins, and anyone who arrives late is not allowed to take the quiz. Any student who does not take the quiz is given a zero. As a result, students who arrive late to class receive a grade based entirely on their lack of punctuality on a quiz designed to measure learning.
- The top aggregate score a student can have on a summative unit test is reduced based on the number of missing assignments or homework tasks during that unit—so, for example, if Sally only completes 80 percent of the homework assignments, the maximum score she can receive on the unit test is 80 percent.
- Missed tests are given a zero unless students agree to attend a mandatory tutorial session. The session is offered at 6 p.m. on Friday evenings and must be booked via written application two weeks in advance. The make-up test is administered one week after the tutorial—also at 6 p.m. on Friday. Because of the rigidity and inconvenience of this “tutorial support,” very few students go through with it.

The Four Conditions for Punitive Action

Penalties should be just, reasonable, and linked as closely as possible to the offense if the threat of their enactment is to effectively change behaviors. Here’s an example. As a young car driver, I received a lot of speeding tickets. Paying over \$1,200 in fines, though inconvenient, did little to curb my speeding habit. What eventually compelled me to lay off the accelerator was a meeting I had at the government-licensing

branch. “One more ticket in the next 365 days, Mr. Dueck, and you will have your license suspended for one year,” proclaimed the humorless adjudicator. That is all it took for me to go from being pulled over four times a year to getting pulled over once every four years. The threat of losing my license for a year worked well to modify my behavior because it met the CARE guidelines mentioned in the introduction to this book:

- **Care:** The prospect of not being allowed to drive my car for a year terrified me. To say I that cared would be a massive understatement.
- **Aims:** The government wants safer roads and fewer emergency calls. Speeding drivers should pay for the costs that they incur.
- **Reduction:** Since that meeting in 1994, I have had three speeding infractions and I have never been summoned for another licensing meeting.
- **Empowerment:** I had power over my own speeding and it was up to me to slow down. Only I could improve my time management, leave earlier for important events, and turn on the cruise control feature.

Where the threat of losing my driver’s license met the CARE guidelines for punitive action, behavior-based grading does not. Here is why.

Care

Many students do not appear to care about grading consequences. Consider the following conversation I had with a frustrated educator who used late penalties:

Teacher: I use late penalties of 10 to 20 percent reductions and I will tell you why: I am tired of working harder than my students. I put in the effort, the time at lunch or after school, and they don’t.

Me: I have felt the same frustration. Do most of these students seem to care about a 10 or 20 percent deduction to their grades?

Teacher: (Pause.) No, and that is a huge frustration as well. I keep applying the same penalty to the same students.

Some students care about grading penalties and others don't. Those who are very concerned about getting into a good college might work hard to avoid grading penalties, whereas others might prefer to suffer the penalties than to actually complete their assignments. Students who ask questions like "If I don't hand in my work, what is my grade going to be?" or "If I get a zero on this assignment, am I still passing?" are probably debating whether or not to consider the assignment optional. When students opt to ignore assignments, penalties may serve to make teachers feel as though they've addressed the issue, but they do not increase student accountability or responsibility. Academic threats have lost their potency for students who are already disillusioned with their school experience and thus inclined to think, "If I'm already failing, why should I care about another zero?" Many students confront issues that loom much larger than late or missing assignments.

For many years I handed out penalties for late assignments like they were candy. It took me too long to recognize that school is like society at large: if we are building more prisons, something isn't working.

Aims

Punitive grading does not complement my overall aim to measure learning outcomes, increase student confidence, and provide an environment of fairness and equity. My job requires me to measure evidence of learning or capacity against a set of standards. If my grades reflect behavioral penalties, then they do not relate directly to learning outcomes. Furthermore, applying lates and zeros does not inspire academic confidence in my students, some of whom may be very capable academically but struggling with behavior patterns. And despite popular belief, punitive grades diminish fairness and equity in the classroom: the moment I apply grading consequences to factors outside my

classroom, some students will be penalized more than others for factors that are not in their control.

Reduction

Punitive grading may not result in a reduction of the negative behavior. Consider, for example, that an estimated 20 percent of people are chronic procrastinators (Marano, 2003). Students in this cohort who have trouble meeting deadlines and who struggle with organization will undoubtedly feel frustrated and discouraged by lates and zeros. (I can speak from experience as someone who struggles with punctuality and due dates—traits directly linked to my speeding violations.)

Many systems in our society account for the fact that humans will predictably miss deadlines. Airlines appear to set the boarding time for the flight further in advance than is actually required; the state of Iowa has a 60-day grace period for those who forget to renew their driver's licenses on or before their birthdays. Those who think teachers are all punctual and time-conscious might be disappointed at the reality that many teachers struggle with due dates. In every school in which I've worked, a certain percentage of teachers tended to arrive late for staff meetings. I do not know if they were penalized for this, and I am not suggesting that they should have been; for all I know, these teachers were late because they were helping students or giving injured athletes first aid.

Empowerment

Students being penalized must have power over the causal variables. Of the four conditions that must be satisfied in order for me to apply a penalty, this is arguably the most powerful. As Ross Greene (2009) puts it, we have to believe that "if a kid could do well, he would do well" (p. 49). Many of the factors that affect students' abilities to succeed in school lie outside of their control. Here are some examples:

Poverty. Around 22 percent of students in the United States live in poverty (Felling, 2013; National Poverty Center, 2013). Many

of them lack basic amenities such as electricity, heat, and access to computers or the Internet, and face such additional hurdles as utility disconnection, depression, overcrowded homes, and physical abuse (Jensen, 2009). Because nobody chooses to be poor, any of the effects of poverty that contribute to students' lates and zeros in school are by definition outside of their control.

Ability. Student may not have the ability to complete certain assignments, whether because of learning disabilities, gaps in learning due to school transfers, health issues, inadequate mentoring, truancy, or lack of background knowledge.

Confidence. Lack of confidence can prevent students from even attempting assignments, or cause them to surrender at the first sign of difficulty. Such students may find it easier to avoid their work entirely than to take another hit to their self-esteem, and may also lack the confidence to ask for help. Such negative patterns can extend over generations, as the inability to self-advocate is often an inherited trait (Gladwell, 2008).

Environment. Students from lower-income families are more likely to live in households where violence or neglect is present, or that are simply exceptionally loud or busy (Jensen, 2009). Many students wait until late in the evening, when the likelihood that arguments or other disturbances will erupt wanes dramatically, to complete their homework.

Substance abuse and emotional struggles. Concentration and ability can be severely inhibited by drug and alcohol issues and by emotional struggles due to conflict, isolation, or neglect. Research indicates that success in math and languages is most adversely affected by students' emotional states (Medina, 2008).

Parents. As both a teacher and an administrator, I have witnessed the positive and negative effects of parenting decisions. In many cases, parents enable negative student behaviors by excusing their children's truancy. Conversely, some parents will refuse to excuse their children

when they skip a test, thus flinging open the door to all of the grading penalties at the teacher's disposal. Such differences in parenting affect both to whom and to what extent penalties are levied.

Many educators still hold on to the assumption that parents are capable, grounded, and in control of their children. Add this to the list of traditional mind-sets in need of an overhaul. Too often, children are more capable than their parents, often attempting to balance school-work with raising younger siblings, buying groceries, and masking their parents' substance abuse and violence issues.

How Behavior-Based Grading Contributes to Statistical Sabotage

If a student makes a concerted effort to complete a quiz and does not get a single answer correct, then a zero grade is arguably an accurate measure of the student's understanding. However, if the student receives a zero simply because he or she didn't complete the quiz, then the grade is not an accurate measure of understanding (O'Connor, 2010). Once the accuracy of grading data is compromised, a number of difficulties emerge.

Imagine a scenario in which Johnny is scheduled to take two quizzes for the same class, one on Monday and the other on Thursday. He skips the Monday quiz but is present for the one on Thursday. Johnny's teacher gives him an automatic zero on Monday's quiz because he didn't take it, and a zero on Thursday's quiz because he got all the answers wrong. Anyone looking at the teacher's grade book would find it impossible to determine whether the zeros reflect lack of work or lack of understanding. If Johnny also receives lates on assignments, his grading data are even more ambiguous. The teacher in this case might be advised to use special codes or symbols to understand and possibly defend Johnny's aggregate score. I will admit to having had the following type of conversation in parent-teacher meetings:

Me: Good afternoon, Ms. Smith. Thanks for attending the parent-teacher conference.

Ms. Smith: Thanks. My daughter Jill is really struggling in social studies. I was devastated to see that she got 55 percent on her report card.

Me: Well, perhaps she's not doing that badly.

Ms. Smith: What do you mean? Is she not at 55 percent?

Me (pausing, showing some discomfort): Well, I can see that, in my grade book, some of her scores are circled in blue and others are highlighted. Those symbols indicate a reduction in value from what she would have had if she had handed the work in on time.

Ms. Smith: I'm confused.

Me: Well, um, one circle indicates that the assignment was a day late and therefore the score would have been 10 percent greater than it is. Two circles means that the assignment was two days late and therefore would have been 20 percent greater. I see here that I used a highlighter over the top of the existing circles for her poster assignment, indicating that the score was reduced more than 30 percent—most likely to a maximum of 50 percent.

Ms. Smith: Most likely?

Me (deciding to switch tactics): Listen, if Jill would get her work in on time, we wouldn't be having this confusion.

Ms. Smith: Confusion is right. I wish I had known about all of these lates. Did you phone or e-mail me about these issues?

Me: Sorry, I guess I should have called, but I can't keep up with all of these lates in each of my classes and it is Jill's responsibility to let you know.

Ms. Smith: Do you think most teenagers will come home and tell their parents about late or missing assignments?

Me: Probably not.

Ms. Smith: I guess I just want to know where she is actually at academically and to know that 55 percent means something.

I have come to agree with parents like Ms. Smith. She does have the right to know her daughter's actual grade standing according to the learning outcomes.

Imagine the confusion and frustration that would occur if this type of punitive measurement system were used in the medical community—for example, if a patient's overdue hospital parking fine were factored into her blood pressure reading. It's a challenge to find any other profession that purports to offer personal, measurable data in which the numbers can be as warped as we allow them to be in education.

It is disturbing that the destructive power of a zero grade is often the reason that teachers use it. If the goal is to punish or compel, a zero is the ultimate numerical weapon. When factored into the average of an otherwise consistent set of scores, the result can be considerable. Consider the examples in Figure 1.1, showing two sets of identical scores except for a single zero. As a measure of learning, 59.6 percent

Figure 1.1
Effect of a Zero Score on the Final Average (Example 1)

Scores	Scores
78	78
71	71
74	0
68	68
81	81
Final Average	Final Average
74.4	59.6

is clearly a misrepresentation of the extent to which the student likely understands the material. A serious statistical problem exists if we assume that the rest of the scores are based on sound assessments. None of the scores making up the 59.6 percent average come close to the mean score. The whole point of determining an average is to arrive at a singular representation of a set of numbers.

Clearly, zeros can blur the extent to which students demonstrate improvement or mastery of the material. Consider the set of scores in Figure 1.2, purporting to represent tennis-serving skills measured over the course of a two-week unit. The conclusion that the student

Figure 1.2
Effect of a Zero Score on the Final Average (Example 2)

Successful Serves (Out of 10)	
March 1:	0
March 2:	0
March 3:	0
March 4:	2
March 5:	3
March 8:	5
March 9:	7
March 10:	8
March 11:	8
March 12:	9
Average: 4.2/10	

properly completed roughly 4 out of 10 serves is not accurate and in no way predicts future performance. If any of the non-zero scores have further been reduced for reasons not directly pertaining to her tennis-serving skills, such as for tardiness or talking out of turn, then the ambiguity of the scores is even further compounded.

Let's assume that Catherine, a high school sophomore, attends only half of her biology classes during a two-week unit on communicable diseases. On the day of the summative unit test, Catherine opts to skip class and go for coffee with her girlfriends instead. On account of her truancy, she gets a zero on the test. What are the chances that Catherine, at age 16, knows something about herpes, mononucleosis, or AIDS? If Catherine knows absolutely nothing about communicable diseases by the end of the unit, she has either been living under a rock for most of her life or her teacher is completely incompetent. Any score above zero would far more accurately represent the degree of Catherine's knowledge.

Growing up, I had a toy version of NASCAR legend Richard Petty's racecar—number 43. If we are after grades that accurately measure student understanding, adopting a policy of using the numbers of students' favorite racecars for missing work would make about as much sense as using zeros.

Strategies for Addressing Uncompleted Work

Following are some possible solutions for ensuring that student grades more accurately measure

PERSONAL STORY

Imagine that the history teachers at Colonial High School are so fed up with their students' late and missing assignments that they appropriate their department's budget to pay for a set of wooden stocks such as those used in colonial times to punish wrongdoers. Not only do the stocks serve to teach students a little history, but they also help motivate students to complete their work on time. The teachers institute a simple rule: get your assignments in by the due date or spend a day in the stocks. The students, terrified at the prospect of being constrained in a wooden device and having tomatoes pelted at them by jeering classmates, all begin delivering their assignments on time. To their delight, the teachers hardly ever need to resort to the stocks. The system is considered a resounding success: very few students are punished, and rates of homework completion skyrocket.

The history teachers throw a party at the house of the mastermind behind the idea, Mr. Bastille. Though Ms. Lamb, the head of the science department, can hear the revelry from her house down the street, she is not feeling the celebratory zeal. She is frustrated because many of her own students have suddenly stopped handing in their work on time, choosing to spend their time on history assignments instead. Though she's unaware of the history teachers' newly instituted method of punishment, she has overheard some of her students discussing stocks and is surprised at their newfound interest in economics.

If this story were to continue, the science teachers would either ask the history teachers to dismantle the stocks or institute their own draconian punishments. A less extreme version of this choice confronts teachers all the time, especially at the secondary level. I have been approached by teachers who feel caught between competing forces *(cont.)*

PERSONAL STORY CONTINUED

when implementing changes to their grading methods. Many teachers would like to explore ways to motivate students without the threat of penalties, but fear that their students will then spend the bulk of their time on assignments for classes that do institute penalties. I have chosen the term *interdepartmental cold war* to describe this dilemma.

Of course, because students have a limited amount of time and energy, there will always be some form of competition among teachers. One way to mitigate this would be for all educators to avoid adopting punitive measures that reward compliance rather than evidence of learning.

competency, improvement, and understanding of material.

Strategy #1: Use Incompletes and Interventions Rather Than Zeros

STEP 1: Set due dates and time spans. Due dates for assignments are like the dates we set when inviting friends over for dinner: they serve as promises that are expected to be met. When guests arrive late for dinner, the food gets cold and the visit is often shortened. Broken promises inconvenience others, and a pattern of broken promises can compromise the integrity and credibility of the promise breaker. I let my students know that I work hard to grade them fairly and that I am prepared to invest extra time to that end—not to guilt trip them, but to remind them that I’m keeping up my end of the bargain and expect them to do so as well.

I’ve had success with setting a time span rather than a due date. Time spans such as “sometime next week” provide students with flexibility and choice. When I give students a week’s span to hand in their work, I usually consider Friday to be the true due date, but I am happy to give the impression that there is a range of acceptable dates. Students begin to feel a helpful nudge on Monday as the “early” assignments start trickling in. Whether you’ve set a due date or time span, it is imperative that students not wait too long to start working on their assignments. A tidal wave of late assignments is unbearable for the teacher, and rushing at the last minute is never in students’ best interests.

STEP 2: Use the Late or Incomplete Assignment Form. One day when I was grading papers at home, I noticed that one of my students, Jimmy, hadn't turned in his map assignment. I tried to recall if there was a reason for it to be missing. Was he in class on Friday? Did he tell me he'd hand it in on Monday? Did he misunderstand when it was due? Is he struggling with the content? Was he one of the athletes away on a basketball trip? Sitting at home on a Saturday afternoon, all I could do was speculate.

Luckily, my frustration with not knowing where Jimmy's assignment was led me to design the Late or Incomplete Assignment Form shown in Figure 1.3. Now, when students don't hand in or finish their

Figure 1.3
Late or Incomplete Assignment Form

Name: _____ Date: _____

Missing assignment: _____

Reason(s) for missing the due date:

<input type="checkbox"/> school-based sports/extracurricular	<input type="checkbox"/> heavy course load
<input type="checkbox"/> job/work requirements	<input type="checkbox"/> social event(s)
<input type="checkbox"/> difficulty with material/lack of understanding	<input type="checkbox"/> club or group event out of school
<input type="checkbox"/> procrastination	<input type="checkbox"/> other

Details: _____

Revised completion date: _____

Interventions/support required:

<input type="checkbox"/> extra study/home-based effort	<input type="checkbox"/> use of planner
<input type="checkbox"/> homework club	<input type="checkbox"/> help with time management
<input type="checkbox"/> extra help from teacher	<input type="checkbox"/> counselor visit
<input type="checkbox"/> tutorial	<input type="checkbox"/> other

Details: _____

work, I ask them to fill out the form and explain what happened. The last section of the form asks student to select potential interventions that might help them complete the assignment.

The benefits of this form are twofold. First, the student can actually plan a strategy for completing the assignment. Second, students see what interventions are available in the school to help them: students who are suffering emotionally, for example, might not realize that school counselors are available to talk. This form allows a missing assignment to be the catalyst for students to obtain the support they need to be happy and effective in all classes.

Consider the following example. Greg was a quiet student in my 12th grade history class who had always done fairly well. Suddenly, over the course of a month, he began to accrue absences, he failed to hand in a few assignments, and his quiz and test scores dropped. It is not uncommon for high school seniors to experience a dip in performance, so I did not get too alarmed. Though Greg assured me that he would be able to turn things around, I asked if there were any outside factors affecting his academic life. After a pause and a few too many blinks, he responded.

“I was in a car accident a few weeks back,” he said. “That might have something to do with it. I’ve had a splitting headache ever since.”

“A few weeks back!” Further questioning revealed that the accident had occurred about six weeks prior and that he had not sought any medical attention afterward. Rather than focusing on absences, missed assignments, and poor test scores, I worked on connecting Greg with a doctor, a physiotherapist, and a chiropractor. Within about a week, Greg appeared happier and more energetic and reported that his headaches had disappeared. He was soon caught up on his work and doing better than he ever had before.

Teachers should read and sign the Late or Incomplete Assignment Form after students have filled it in. This ensures that teachers hold the students accountable for revised due dates and that they are aware of any issues needing immediate attention. If a student suggests

an unreasonably distant completion date, the teacher should feel free to say no and impose a more reasonable time frame. And if a student indicates that his or her underlying issue is particularly grave—neighborhood violence, for example—the teacher should strive to put supports in place for that student as soon as possible.

STEP 3: Implement intervention strategies. Any interventions noted on the Late or Incomplete Assignment Form need to be implemented in a timely manner. If the student suggests that he will turn in the assignment within a day or two, let him prove it; however, if the two days pass and nothing's handed in, it's time to say, "OK, we tried it your way—now it is my turn." Here are some long- and short-term intervention strategies that are worth considering:

- Homework-completion centers that students attend during lunch or after school.
- Saturday school as a requirement for those who are falling behind in their work. The threat of Saturday school is enough to scare many students into completing their assignments.
- In-school suspensions during which students can get support from teachers.
- Pair-ups of older students needing community hours with younger students needing help.

STEP 4: When necessary, assign incompletes. Listing assignments as "incomplete" is preferable than resorting to the finality of the powerful zero. Without a numerical value, an incomplete assignment will not risk dropping a student's final average precipitously for reasons unrelated to the student's understanding of content.

Once a student is afforded the opportunity to complete an assignment, the assignment should be listed as "incomplete" in the grade book until it is completed. In fact, the student's *entire course standing* should be listed as incomplete as long as the assignment isn't finished and handed in. Although some schools or districts may not allow