

# ACCOUNTABILITY: TEACHING THROUGH ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK, NOT GRADING

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## ABSTRACT

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*Grading policies such as refusing to accept late work, giving grades of zero, and refusing to allow students to redo their work may be intended as punishment for poor performance, but such policies will not really teach students to be accountable, and they provide very little useful information about students' mastery of the material. Assessment and feedback, particularly during the course of learning, are the most effective ways for students to learn accountability in their work and in their personal lives.*

True story: It was class transition time, and students filled the hallway outside my room. I sipped on a bottle of water while standing in my doorway watching over the traffic flow. Four classrooms away, my colleague, Jerry, burst from his room, hands waving in the air over his head.

"Four-fifths of my students keep failing my tests," he shouted to me from his doorway. "Well, screw 'em if they can't study!"

The water leapt suddenly to the wrong pipe in my throat – I choked. Did I just hear Jerry say what I think he said? I coughed twice, wiped the spittle from my mouth, and started making my way to my friend through the river of students. What if there were parents in the hallway at that

moment who heard those comments? Well, I thought, there were parents here by proxy; any one of these students can go home and tell mom and dad what Jerry yelled down the hallway.

As I walked, I prepared what I was going to say to my colleague. My first thought was something like, "Maybe you've misjudged the date of your retirement." When I finally arrived, however, I actually said, "Look, Jerry, this is not cool. If eighty percent of your students are failing your tests, maybe there's something wrong with what you're doing, not what they're doing." Then, as I pointed to his doorway, I added, "Now get back into that classroom and live up to the promise of teaching."

His eyes widened, his body and mind still caught up in his exasperation. After a moment, though, his features softened, and he said, "You're right. I'm sorry." Then he headed back into his room. Students followed him through the doorway. He had just a few moments to get it together before inspiring young minds once again. I returned to my own classroom realizing what a thin line we walk. Would someone be there for me?

Accountability is not a one-way street, nor is it departmentalized. In simplified terms, teachers hold themselves accountable to students, the school system, the curriculum, and a set of professional ethics. They hold students accountable for hard work, civil behavior, and learning the material. None of these is a sole connection, of course. In efforts to find liability and for what a student is answerable, we sometimes forget that a student learns from an aggregate of factors: the teacher, the student himself, the curriculum, his parents, his friends, the media, the community, available resources, time, and socio-economic status, just for starters. Who or what will we hold in contempt, then, for the student's failure to thrive, should it happen? And if the student soars beyond expectations, who will reap the accolades?

It's interesting that humans so often need to identify the one responsible. We are causal junkies, sometimes to our detriment, as if causality provides coherence or justification for our feelings towards another. We dash dreams and break whole careers based on often limiting explanations that are force-fit into containers we can classify and stack. Does the need to categorize people, causes, and effects limit what we learn from working with students and colleagues? In many cases, yes. In education, we are so focused on causal relationships that we often fail to see the organic nature and fuzzy logic of human learning. The best educators, then, embrace systems theory and a culture of multi-faceted response over a pure scientific design and a myopic focus on single factors working in isolation from one another.

This is not to say that single-focus education studies of accountability are a waste of time. On the contrary they are invaluable. The step to take, however, is to always hold up such single factor investigations to the light of context and multiple accountabilities in order to be fully interpreted.

The contributors to the online collective encyclopedia, Wikipedia, promote the Yale School of Management definition of accountability as the most satisfactory definition:

“Accountability implies a concern for the welfare of those with whom one works. Accountability denotes an ambition to leverage one’s position in the economy to the benefit of society as a whole. Accountability at the most fundamental level signifies an obligation to one’s self - an obligation to lead a meaningful life - both in and out of the workplace consistent with one’s own values.”

Notice the focus on being a benefit to others, finding meaning, and adhering to our own values as we interact with one another. The sentiment is, “I’m here to help you along, to help you grow, and to be mutually ethical with one another.” This is different from many teachers, ‘policy-makers,’ and communities’ operational definition of accountability:

“By golly,” says the politician, “It’s time we held schools and teachers accountable for high quality education and students’ mastery of the basics,” as if teachers are recalcitrant children in need of stern discipline. One teacher says to her misbehaving students, “You will be held accountable for your actions,” and another says, “You better shape up and work hard because I’ll find out who studied and who didn’t when I grade your tests.” This is the “caughtya” and “gotcha” mentality – I caught you making mistakes and now I’m documenting it for you.

Are these the approaches that really teach students to be accountable? Are these the behaviors that enable us to be accountable to our curriculum, ethics, and profession? No, if for no other reasons than they are extrinsic and amount only to students’ panicky desire to escape the cold piercing of the lepidopterist’s pin. There is no growth in accountability within the student that will carry over to the next situation.

Grading is one of the default tools teachers use to play the “gotcha” game. Grades are not the effective teachers or accountability measures we

imagine them to be. Let's take a look at a few grading practices that teachers mistakenly think teach accountability.

"I don't care if I get an F," says Alex in 9th grade who then shrugs and tosses his hair to one side in defiance. "School sucks," he adds. Such statements signal: 1) teachers may be doing a poor job of making learning compelling and meaningful, or 2) the student making these statements should not be in charge of his own learning. For purposes of this commentary, we'll assume the first conclusion is false, – and the teacher is doing all he can to make learning meaningful. We'll focus on the second one instead.

Most middle and high school students do not have the emotional or intellectual maturity or the life experience to be given complete authority over their own destiny. When secondary teachers record an "F" on a student's poorly prepared project, and think that "F" will teach the importance of working hard, using time wisely, and the tough realities of life, they are incorrect. Letting the low grade do our teaching is an abdication of our responsibilities as educators. Many teachers defend their abdication with the idea, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink," as if teaching were a 50-50 endeavor for students and teachers. "Ralph has to do his work and meet me halfway," Mr. Agar, the biology teacher claims.

In truth, it's a 70-30 relationship. Great teachers get the horse to water, and they find ways to make it drink at least some of the time. No one is expecting miracles, but they are expecting reasonable attempts to perform them.

Let's tackle three tough grading issues when it comes to accountability. First, grading late work. When students turn in work late, how we respond can mean the difference between learning and non-learning. We should realize, too, that we won't respond in a universal manner to all situations; "one size fits all" rarely does.

For most teachers, it comes down to whether the late work is chronic or occasional. If it's occasional, i.e. the student has a long history of turning in work on time and this is just a rare mistake on his part, the teacher realizes that she is not undoing years of self-discipline or healthy fear of missing deadlines by extending mercy just this once (or even a second time later in the year). In fact, she realizes, she's teaching compassion and the idea that we're all here to look out for one another. One of the clearest examples of a high intellect is the willingness to extend mercy to others. We assume all educators are or aspire to be intellectual, hence, they are merciful.

If the late work is chronic, i.e. this is the third or fourth time this grading period that this student has not turned in work on time, a different response is required. The teacher doesn't just blindly punish, however; she investigates and takes action. She asks the student about his time management, personal responsibilities, and home resources after school hours. She considers whether or not the developmental level of instruction or tasks is appropriate for the student. She attempts to resolve the issues and proceed with the student's learning. Whether the student is an immature jerk who "blows off" everything or a truly nice and ethical person who just doesn't get it cognitively is irrelevant; we do the same things: teach the student and give him the chance to correct the behavior and learn the intended material. Our goal is that he learns the material.

Work done without hope for a positive outcome rarely results in significant learning and more often results in resentment and damaged relationships among students, parents, and teachers. We need to teach and grade in ways that garner hope for students, otherwise, they will throw down the ball and go home. Students who forfeit their learning are not the mission of our schools. When it comes to late work, then, it comes down to a few options:

First, we can take a whole letter grade off the assignment's final grade for each day it's late.

Second, we can take only a few points off the project's final grade for each day it's late, not a whole letter grade. It is enough to deliver a clear message, but not enough to make the student want to give up learning the material.

Third, we can record two grades – one for the late grade (a day late, a letter grade lower), and one for the true grade. For example, if a student earned a legitimate "A" on a project yet submitted it three days late, his grade would be an, "A/D." We would use the "A" to document the student's progress toward learning objectives, to provide accurate feedback to students and families, and to inform instructional decisions. The "D" would be there for clerical reasons and to keep the peace with teammates who disagree with a mere points-off instead of a grades-off approach.

With the altered, late grade being more or less "smoke" that doesn't count in our decision-making, teachers might question whether or not this approach really teaches students self-responsibility and accountability. The answer is that it may or may not. Teachers who raise this question are making the assumption that the role of final grades in education is to teach students responsibility. It isn't. In fact, single marks that attempt to represent vast arrays of mastery indicators and behaviors are very poor

teachers of personal ethics, self-discipline, and responsibility. We have to move our profession off this panacea role for grades.

A grade is supposed to provide an accurate, undiluted indicator of a student's mastery of learning standards. That's it. It is not meant to be a part of a reward, motivation, or behavioral contract system. If the grade is distorted by weaving in a student's personal behavior, character, and work habits, it cannot be used to successfully provide feedback, document progress, or inform our instructional decisions regarding that student – the three primary reasons we grade. A student who is truly performing at the highest instructional levels with the highest marks, even though it took him longer to achieve those levels – for whatever reason – is not served by labeling him with false, lower marks and treating him as if he operates at the lower instructional levels just because it took him a little longer to get to the same standard of excellence. All decisions and responses based on such marks would be false and ineffective. He's achieved excellence, and his digressions should not be held against him. Otherwise the grade is an inaccurate portrayal. Second, 'turning zeroes to fifties. When using the 100-point scale, should a teacher round zeroes to 50's or 60's, or leave them as a zero? Which one teaches students to be responsible?

Imagine the student who brags to classmates that he didn't work on a project or turn anything in, yet still earned a 60 on the project. A 60 is in the F range in most school districts in the United States, though this may differ in Canada and other countries. The teacher needs to ask several questions before changing a zero to a 50 or 60:

- 1) Do I choose the most hurtful, unrecoverable end of the F range, the zero, or do I choose the most constructive, recoverable end of the F range, the sixty (assuming a sixty is still within the F range)?
- 2) An F means a student has failed to demonstrate acceptable evidence of mastery, that's all. It doesn't matter whether he was emotionally immature and didn't follow through on his work assignments or he cognitively couldn't achieve mastery, the outcome is the same – failure to provide evidence of mastery. Do we really need to have multiple gradations of failure, then? Is it helpful to discern between failure, and absolute, super-loser, no-chance-of-passing-unless-you-get-a-mammoth-pile-of-A's level of failure? Are we trying to be punitive or instructive?

The student who brags that he did nothing yet still earned a 60 is really saying to his classmates, "I did nothing at all and I still earned an F." This isn't something to brag about, and he won't do it.

When asked to make the simple proportional comparisons between using a zero on the 4-point scale and a zero on the 100-point scale, teachers quickly realize that a zero earned on a 100-point scale equates to a -6 on a 4-point scale (Reeves, 2006). Most teachers agree that students who don't do work on a 4-point scale should get a zero, not something that sets them in the hole six full grade levels. Just as we don't want an A to have an undue inflationary influence on a final grade, we don't want an F to have an undo deflationary influence either. When we turn students' zeroes into 60's in our gradebooks, we are not giving students something for doing nothing. That's not even close to what we're doing. We're adjusting the grade intervals so that every grade has a proportionate influence on the overall grade, and any grade calculations we do are mathematically justified and useful.

In Virginia Beach, Virginia, School Board member Emma L. Davis (Practicing Zero Intolerance, 2005) argues against recording zeroes:

"Consider trying to find the average temperature over five days and recording 85, 82, 83 and 86, then forgetting a day and recording 0. The average temperature would be 67, a figure that does not accurately show the weather from that week. If those temperatures were grades, a student would fail after consistently earning B's and C's."

Grades must be accurate indicators of students' mastery. Where is the accountability for ethical behavior when the teacher continues to record zeroes which have been proven to be inaccurate portrayals of mastery that are unjustified ethically and mathematically? What about the accountability of the principal or school district who allows it to happen? Remember the operational definition of accountability excerpted from above: "...a concern for the welfare of those with whom one works...to the benefit of society....an obligation to lead a meaningful life-both in and out of the workplace consistent with one's own values." We fail students when we misuse grading practices on the pretense of teaching accountability.

We can jump up and down, calling for higher standards and rigid accountability while presenting overwhelming data on individual students all we want, but it all means nothing – nothing – unless the failing student receives our assessment's message constructively and he perceives that there is a ladder extended to help crawl from the hole. It doesn't matter why the student failed; effective secondary teachers provide the ladder.

This raises the final grading issue to consider when it comes to accountability: allowing students to re-do work or re-take tests. The ques-

tion isn't so much as to whether or not to do it. Most secondary teachers allow students to do this. It's whether or not they will give students full credit for having done so. If a student gets a "C," they reason, then goes back and re-does the project or test and earns an "A," how is that fair to the student who earned an "A" the first time around? And how does it teach the student who had his grade changed to an "A" to be accountable?

Once again, teachers who work this way are operating under two myths: First, they think that students all learn at the same rate or pace. They don't. This is reckless pedagogy. Second, they think it benefits both students and the school (i.e. the community) for all students to demonstrate mastery on the same day or else never be given the chance to show excellence in that task. It doesn't. It actually causes students to drift away from the task, and, for some it prevents further pursuit of the topic. Do we really want to declare that the first Wednesday in October is the only day students have to completely master the Krebs Cycle in biology? Does it really matter ten years from now that the student mastered the Krebs Cycle on that Wednesday, that Thursday, that Friday, or even two weeks later?

No, it doesn't matter. Yet in the accountability "Crusades," we inexplicably respond to students' requests for redoing assessments with these golden, yet inappropriate nuggets:

"You can redo the test, but I'll only give you half a point for each one you redo."

"Only students who get D's and F's can redo."

"The highest grade you can get on a re-take is a "B" out of deference for those who earned an "A" the first time around."

"You can re-take the test, but I'll average the new grade with the first grade to determine your final grade."

All of these are, "Learn or I Will Hurt You" mindsets that result in inaccurate and thereby, invalid and unusable grades. Teachers' grades must be accurate.

When we don't allow re-takes, we allow students to get away with not learning. When we mandate re-takes, however, we are in students' faces, tenacious, demanding excellence. We hold them accountable. Because we don't assign things that are "skippable," we ask students to go back and redo tasks until they get it right.

"There is no extra credit here to raise your grade," you say to the inquiring student. "Go back and redo the project until you meet the high standard of excellence set for it." The student must now focus on the new



work the class is doing while also carrying the burden of re-doing previous work. The motivation to be accountable for the learning the first time around is palpable.

Before I am deluged with emails claiming such a stance on re-takes is physically impossible to do when teaching so many students as middle school teachers do, know that there are ways to conduct it such that sanity is maintained. That's fodder for another commentary, however. If you're impatient, please consider chapter 10 of my book, *Fair Isn't Always Equal* (Wolmeli, 2006).

Finally, what about effort and behavior? Should they be woven into an academic portrayal of mastery? Is that not the perfect place to promote accountability? To answer these concerns, consider this scenario: A student does none of your homework, yet aces every test of proficiency; he earns an "A" on every demonstration of mastery. Does he get anything less than an "A" on your report card or transcript?

No. The grade must remain accurate in order to be useful, and it's not accurate when it is mixed with non-academic factors. Homework is practice, never to be confused with absolute, final declarations of summative mastery. It's what we do in route to mastery, not mastery itself. We would never dream of weaving into the Bar Exam grade for a lawyer all his homework percentages during the past four years of study. His qualifications are based purely on whether or not he passed the Bar Exam, not the practice sessions he did to get there.

If the student could pass all of our tests without doing any of the homework, the teacher has the problem, not the student. The homework practice served no purpose. It should have been transformative and meaningful. If we penalize students for not doing his meaningless work, we only breed resentment. They learn that school isn't about learning, it's about the teacher's whims. As educators, we should be held accountable for homework that matters.

There is no legally defensible, objective way to measure a student's effort, integrity, and initiative. One student's quickly scribbled paragraph on his knee on the way to school on the bus this morning is another student's full-body, total immersion, multi-resourced, month-long endeavor. When asked to identify how they grade students' efforts, many teachers make statements such as:

"He showed more oomph."

"He took initiative."

"He answered the "why" of the question."

"He elaborated."

“He went above and beyond.”

“He colored his map of Africa.”

These are “guess what’s on the teacher’s mind” approaches, and some students are better at guessing what’s on the teacher mind than others. No student should be punished for not being a good mind-reader. There’s no accountability teaching here.

Most of those who study assessment and grading practices as they relate to learning agree that incorporating non-academic factors into academic indicators of mastery isn’t helpful or accurate, nor does it teach students to be more responsible and thereby accountable (Brookhart, 2004; Guskey, 2000; Marzano, 2001; Nolen & Taylor, 2005; O’Connor, 2002; Popham, 2004; Reeves, 2006; Stiggins, 2004; Tomlinson, 2000; Wiggins & McTighe, 2001; Wormeli, 2006).

Teachers want students to “get it” that self-discipline, hard work, and integrity lead to achievement. They want students to learn that they will be held accountable for their poor decisions and subsequent behaviors, and that this is actually a good and caring thing. Many of today’s role-models and cultural references, however, have deflected personal accountability, and it’s hard to compete with those influences. Modern students have little frame of reference for President Clinton’s lies regarding sexual relations with Monica Lewinsky, nor do they remember the issues surrounding the Exxon Valdez, or the O-ring fiasco on NASA’s Space Shuttle Challenger, but many of us do. Today’s students have reference points, however, for the Enron scandal, our country’s premature rush to war with Iraq, and numerous movie/sports/music stars’ repeated law-breaking after promising to fix their personal problems.

The fact that Martha Stewart still denies her wrongdoing though a court of law and jury of her peers have said otherwise, and that she has been only slightly inconvenienced while continuing her rise as a cultural icon, is difficult to explain to students. The law seems blurred for some individuals, but not for others. This is not to suggest that those who break the law don’t deserve a chance to make amends and return to a status warranting our full respect and love, but the experiences with Martha Stewart and other celebrities leaves a lot to explain to students who blame their own transgressions against the school rules on ignorance or someone else. None of us wants students to think that those in power – socially, culturally, or politically – can get away with indiscretion, negligence, or criminal acts.

Every single school week, teachers can counter these examples that promote the deflection of personal accountability with learning experiences that do. Here are some specific ideas on how to use assessment and feedback to teach accountability:

- Hold up a figurative mirror to students daily. With as many tasks and assignments as possible, show them what they did, and show them what they were supposed to have done. Then help them compare and contrast the two. For example, you might say to a student, "You were supposed to follow this lab procedure (list the protocols). Now let's look at what you actually did." Let the student lead the discussion, identifying what followed and what didn't follow lab protocols. Ask the student to summarize his overall adherence to the lab protocols afterward.
- Increase your classroom focus on formative, on-going assessment. Many teachers spend most of their creative and professional energy designing and emphasizing summative assessments, i.e. culminating projects and unit tests. These are post-learning experiences; students don't learn much about the subject or personal responsibility when doing them. Real learning of both the topic and personal responsibility comes from specific, timely, and frequent feedback to students during the learning, not after the learning. This doesn't always have to come from you. The student himself, other students, and other adults can provide feedback as well. Change the ratio: spend more energy and time designing formative assessments than you do summative assessments.
- Present work samples from students who respected accountability as a positive thing. These products were created with students demonstrating self-discipline and integrity with their work. They held themselves accountable to teacher and the goals of the lessons. Then present non-examples in which students were not self-disciplined or accountable and help students see the differences in the work samples.
- Videotape students working independently and in small groups. Most of our secondary students are so self-absorbed or concentrate so much on the immediate moment, they struggle to see the way the rest of the world sees them. Invite them to watch short segments of their work on video -- five to 10 minutes works fine, and ask them if what they see of themselves in the video is the reputation they want to have among their peers and teachers. If not, guide them in changing

- their behavior to match the positive reputation they want.
- Ask them to create calendars of completion with which they task analyze the project, i.e. break it down to smaller steps, and plot the tasks on a timeline or calendar. Then ask them to identify checkpoints where it would be reasonable for the teacher to check their progress toward their goals.
  - Publicly and frequently model holding yourself accountable to others. Next to personal experience, there is no greater teacher. This means following rules, for example, such as: Limit yourself to the posted 10 minutes at the photocopier, turn your paperwork in on time, don't take the short cut through the library if the sign says not to do so, don't make an extra copy of software licensed to the school for your home use, and don't chew gum in school if it's against school rules.
  - Change standardized test data into information students can use. Put feedback in student-friendly language.
  - Invite former students and respected members of the community who have experienced life when being accountable, and maybe a few who initially did not feel accountable to anyone, but then later learned, perhaps the hard way, how important it was. These testimonials go a long way with secondary students.
  - Avoid playing "Gotcha" with students. Look for growth over time, not number of mistakes over time. Plan for students' success, not how to document their fall. Make the classroom culture very affirming for those who hold themselves accountable for positive behaviors and values. Affirm positive steps toward personal accountability.
  - Guide students in candid analysis of the behavior of others, including nationally-known people, when they try to deflect personal accountability.
  - Make sure those students who demonstrate accountability get opportunities to move on to interesting new fields of study and new tasks.

There is an old story about ancient Roman engineers and accountability. It says that whenever they were constructing an arch, the engineer who designed it stood directly underneath the center of the arch as the capstone was hoisted into position. He had worked hard, took responsibility, and knew his competence was true. It was the ultimate accountability if his design failed.

Short of putting our students, our curriculum, and our schools in harm's way, we embrace accountability as the great societal foundation and teaching tool it is. It is not a four-letter word literally or figuratively. It

refers to how we can benefit each other and hold true to our values. The troublesome part is how to teach it to the next generation.

Teaching accountability requires adherence to sound pedagogy, not just conventional grading practices always done because that's the way they've always been done. Assessment and feedback, particularly during the course of learning, are the most effective ways for students to learn accountability in their work and personal lives. Let's give students every model in our daily selves, modeling how to be accountable to one another, our vision of a nurturing school, and professional ethics. Instead of blaming students and yelling down the hallway in exasperation, we can invite candid discussion and open our practice to the scrutiny of respected colleagues. Accountability by its nature requires the interaction of others in our work. Individually, we are not, but together we are, accountable.

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